Hoflich, Peter

Voids metamorphosis, or, The postmodern autobiography of Doppleganger Suicide

HMS Press (est. 1982) acquired Atlantic Disk Publishers [ADP] (Atlanta Georgia) in 1994 and in 1995 created its own Imprint: Books On Disk [BOD]. HMS Press ceased its electronic book publishing in 1999. ADP ran out of Stamford Connecticut and BOD ran out of London Ontario. The National Library of Canada requires by law, one copy of any electronic book published for Legal Deposit. All ADP & BOD & EBIP electronic books are being converted from WordPerfect & Text ascii files to PDF files for this purpose. Electronic Books In Print [EBIP] are books produced with the assistance of the London Chapter of the Canadian Poetry Association [CPA] in paperback, chapbook or electronic format.

ALL RIGHTS ARE RETAINED BY THE AUTHOR AND NO PORTION OF THIS MATERIAL SHALL BE COPIED OR TRANSMITTED IN PART OR IN WHOLE VIA ANY MEANS INCLUDING PHOTOCOPIER OR THE INTERNET WITHOUT PERMISSION FROM THE PUBLISHER EXCEPT FOR SHORT PASSAGES USED IN REVIEWS. PERMISSION IS GIVEN FOR PRINTING FOR PERSONAL USE ONLY SHOULD THE READER DECIDE NOT TO READ THIS BOOK ON THE SCREEN, OR ELECTRONIC BOOK READER DEVICE.

Production of this ADP / BOD or EBIP book in PDF format does in no way, mean that the book is being published, reprinted or re-published as an HMS Press publication and is only being produced for Legal Deposit with the National Library of Canada and individual reading samples.

EBIP

HMS Press:

Electronic Books In Print / Books On Disk BOD
ADP & Canadian Poetry Association
London Ontario Chapter

literarynewscpa@yahoo.ca

ISBN 1-895700-23-X

© 1996

by Peter Höflich

Void's Metamorphosis or
the Post-modern Autobiography of
Doppelgänger Suicide

CANADIAN CATALOGUING IN PUBLICATION DATA

Hoflich, Peter

Voids metamorphosis, or, The postmodern
autobiography of Doppleganger Suicide [computer file]

ISBN 1-895700-23-X

I. Title. II. Title: The postmodern
autobiography of Doppleganger Suicide.

PS8565.0335V64 1995 C813'.54 C95-900596-X
PR9199.3.H64V64 1995

(Prologue

There he is, seated in his little writer's cubicle, pulling the dust cover off of his old, strange computer, thinking strange thoughts to himself - the preparatory thoughts of someone who is about to set out on a long and grueling game, slightly dangerous, yet eager to map the limits of his endurance, to test his wits, to gauge his soul with a meter stick, a barometer, or a sextant.

"What shall I write today," he thinks to himself.)

As the day breaks, so does another description of that very day. The temperature is hot, penetrating and obvious; the sunlight glittering and spangled as it bounces off of the four walls of a room, through the eyes, and around the four walls of the ceiling. The air barely moving, the chest barely breathing, the body hot, sweaty, clogged and uncomfortable, the joints loosening after a lengthy time inert. The bird that chirps in reality is not the bird that chirps on paper, as the essence that is captured fails completely to describe those indescribable, ineffable qualities that render any attempt irrelevant. The problems of truth and being are inherent in the inability of words to be used to describe them correctly. Maybe Plato knew what he was talking about, as he argued himself into the mise en abyme, and stayed there for all of recorded eternity... or so it is sometimes perceived.

It began at a time when I was in the midst of another abortive attempt to continue work on one of my many scholarly distractions. This was a detective story, as professors of literature are often wont to write, and I was planning to publish it under a pseudonym, as professors of literature also tend to do. I had already published four such detective novels, all under different pen- names. This was a deliberate attempt to frustrate potential literary hacks, who tend to hound those in my profession, although I often wonder why I should be so vain as to suspect such scrutiny in my particular case. Or perhaps it was an attempt to divorce myself from potential embarrassment, particularly over my last book, a long drawn out work that concluded that a particular suspect could be arrested and serve a proxy sentence for a murder that had actually been committed by someone that existed outside of the law, such as the Queen of England, the wandering ghost of Elvis, or St. Patrick, the patron saint of Ireland (but a murder suspect in the streets of London).

I was writing reflexively, weaving the storyline into its most obvious patterns, obvious at least to the workings of my brain, and when I began to be bored with it, I'd add another dimension to deepen it in one aspect or another. Although my story had assumed some elements of convolution, I didn't worry too much about its salability, since it had already been bought by the publisher of my last book, sight unseen. I worried about it nonetheless, in spite of myself. This tale involves an English professor who, at the beginning of the book, becomes aware of a story that is being published in serial in a local literary magazine. This story, a murder mystery, is about a man and his attempt to discover the identity, motives and nature of a young couple he believes is trying to kill him. The professor in my book takes note of this particular serial because he increasingly realizes that there are certain elements in this story that refer to things he has said in his lectures, or that refer to his field of research, or even scholarly articles that he has published. Rising feelings of paranoia, and his sense of parallel between events in his life and events described in the serial make him suspect that the writer or writers of the serial have similar murderistic designs on his own life for some perverse reasoning. He begins to feel himself identified as the hunted, and he becomes in essence trapped in a deadly literary funhouse of his own creation. His self-initiated hunt for his potential assailants centers on a young couple he often sees in the halls in his college - a Caucasian male and an oriental woman. He always hears them conversing in a foreign language and the professor cannot decide whose of their two native languages is being spoken, which one understands English, which one he might confront, and how this problem might be dealt with. The professor then becomes obsessed with the couple and devises grandiose schemes to kill first one, or the other, or both. He creates scenarios of frustrated love, jealousy, suicide, double suicide, and so on. Accordingly, he forges suicide notes for one, then the other, still not quite certain in which language to forge the notes.

As yet I hadn't decided on a resolution - how it would end, or even îf it could end at all. I was

toying with the idea of involving a junior detective of the small local police department who would investigate the initial complaint from the professor, and survey the plausibility of his claims. He would eventually become involved in investigating the professor's plot, assessing his sanity, and then finally have an affair with the female suspect. I still hadn't decided if this tasteless element was worth pursuing, or if it was simply a required element for this kind of fiction. After four novels, I was still having my doubts. Inevitably, however, the novel was becoming a quest for the true voice of the speaker.

I decided to leave my pontifications behind and seek consolation in the staff room with a cup of coffee, the mental aphrodisiac, and allow myself to be entertained by my more gregarious colleagues, the true cafe lizards. Going down the winding halls of my faculty building, I finally left the maze and came into larger and more open corridors until there was only a door separating me from my destination. I tugged on the handle and was in.

The staff lounge was sparsely furnished with a haphazard collection of mismatched furniture; a blotchy neo-primitivistic oil painting of the Chicago cityscape had been placed somewhat carelessly on the wall so that it just hung lazily, not contributing significantly to the atmosphere of the room at all. The university was known to spare expenses in such matters as optional cosmetic decorations. It was in this anarchic domestic setting that I found my colleague in his element, that is to say, pontificating furiously.

This colleague particularly interested me, mostly because of his studies, which were concerned with the apocrypha of minor Eastern European writers with a further interest in some of the lesser known contemporary Japanese existentialist writers. One of his favorite writers wrote a tetralogy where the main character put God on trail, accusing him of murdering the entire human ancestry, condemning each individual to a long and drawn out death that lasted from birth, up to seventy years (on average in Japan) or even later. He was also telling me of another writer who write primarily about the Western condition and our preoccupation with dogs, claiming that Western man's canonizing the dog as "man's best friend" and his aversion to eating its meat was due solely to the well-known fact that in English "dog" was "God" spelled backwards, a strictly linguistic rationale. I was always astounded that any one writer could make a whole career out of the ongoing expansion of a theme that would otherwise seem very limiting.

Nevertheless, this colleague was a fairly cagey fellow in the sense that he liked to hint towards certain new research that I might be interested in, as someone who specialized in apocalyptic entomological literature, but his role was more that of a coy tease than of someone who was legitimately interested in helping. Or at least that was how I perceived him. Perhaps he was alluding to something real, to a ship that hadn't come in yet - I could never be sure.

Today I was watching him chat with two of the faculty's more attractive unmarried secretaries, who were snickering at his impressions of associate professors. I sat on one of the couches by myself and listened with one ear while I watched the coffee whitener dissolve in my coffee. After a few minutes, he came over to where I was sitting and sat down next to me.

"I say, comrade, I was reading through my journals the other day and I realized something that had been eluding me for quite some time, which was how very familiar you looked. It was just this weekend that I realized who this person was that you remind me so much of."

He paused to play with his mustache, and stare off into space momentarily as he mulled the thoughts that were squirming about his brain, attempting to take shape. I listened carefully to what he had to say, my curiosity piqued, straining for a nugget of anything revealing.

"It was a few years ago when I was in Africa on sabbatical trying to track down a writer

whom I was researching. Maybe you've heard of him, he's the one who would look for words in the most unlikely places - in clouds, written faintly on the pulsing organs of a patient undergoing heart surgery, or in the mysterious codings of computer languages. Well, this writer proved to be very elusive and in the end he turned out to be a fake anyway, but the experience on the whole was far from unrewarding and in moments proved to be quite... interesting...", his drifting thoughts were punctuated with more mustache twirling and the contemplation of empty space. "During this time in Africa, I took to the habit of going to night clubs and drinking heavily. It was there that I ran into this fellow that I'm trying to tell you about. You two look remarkably alike outwardly, and from what I can tell, even have similar tastes in clothes. Same size, same eyes, same unique nose, same stoop, same stature. Somewhat longer hair though. Quite remarkable really. I wonder if you have a lost twin brother somewhere in the world. I've always been fascinated with that sort of thing. The concept of the real doppelgänger has been developed in films and children's cartoons before, but as far as I know it hasn't been researched seriously."

"Tell me about this person, I'm curious too."

"Well, this is the strange thing about him. I somehow managed to spend all that time in that town under the mistaken assumption that he operated a local juice bar with his Japanese girlfriend. I often spoke to him about that juice bar, and he discussed it quite knowledgeably. But in the end I went there and the boss was a different guy, a French fellow. He wasn't even familiar with the man I knew either. The realization left me somewhat in disarray, it made me wonder why I thought he was a juice bar owner in the first place. I had been going on the assumption for so long that I never questioned it."

"So he wasn't a juice bar owner. So what? What was he then, if he wasn't a juice bar owner?"

"That's the thing, I never really found out. Once I told him that I thought he was the juice bar owner, he would never take me seriously. I had to resort to asking other people what he was doing there, but people either didn't know, or wouldn't tell me. I began to feel very childish in the pursuit of trivial information and gave it up. The funny thing is, that after so many nights in the same club with him, I don't even remember his name, or perhaps we just had that familiarity that doesn't require names. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"Not really, but it reminds me of something I saw once in a children's cartoon," I said, trying not to make it sound too facetious.

"Ah, so you do know what I'm talking about."

"No, not really," I replied, "but I'm still curious about this person. Is there any way you can find out something more about him?"

"It would be even harder now than when I was in Africa of course, but I have some friends who are still in town there - they might be able to look into what he's doing, or what ever became of him if he's moved on. I'll look into it, because I rather wonder about him myself. But this reminds me, I have something else for you that you might be able to tell me something about."

"Yes, you've been hinting about it for quite some time now, what is it?"

"Come with me to my office, and I'll show you."

The office wasn't even a stone's throw away, and as we walked along the corridors, I could glimpse into some of my colleagues' offices. Most of them were in, their doors open at least a crack. They would look up as we passed and peer through ancient hollow eyes, past rumpled eggshell eyelids, to look wonderingly, suspiciously. There was my colleague, the specialist in underwater literature, poised precariously over his laptop word processor, the model that had taken him ten years from the level of servant to master. Next was another colleague, the

weathered traveler who claimed to have witnessed and taken part in the bizarre sexual cannibalistic rituals of a remote island tribe. I also caught a glimpse of a new staff member, a delicate man who appeared every day at school with absolute promptness at the exact same time. He wore his suits with maximum accessories including a scarf and white gloves; faculty members had already begun to observe the fact that no one had actually seen this man's skin below his face and some were beginning to doubt that he had any. This particular fellow had not been with us for a full year yet, and we had yet to see if he would begin to reveal anything when the weather started to heat up.

I got the impression from all of these colleagues of mine, none of whom I knew very well, that they knew we would be passing by, and they wanted to get an eyeful of us together as we walked together down the hall.

Coindedentally, we passed a female student in the hall as we walked, a beautiful woman. She looked at both of us with curiosity and a light smile, not saying anything. This was my lover, the woman that I had been seeing irregularly for some time now. We passed each other, and moved on.

Nestled into this peculiar environment was the specific office which my colleague was leading me to. The door was covered with the obligatory cartoon clippings that all related somehow to the Japanese art of seppuku. They had been inherited from the previous resident who was rather famous for teaching a course in dissociation theory and the literature of suicide. He had died the previous year in an unusual barbering accident, and my colleague had inherited his spacious office.

In less than half a year in that office, he had already managed to bring it to an almost complete state of disarray. Piles of paper were stacked precariously on the desks like mini icebergs where only 15% of the knowledge was visible on the surface. Something about the mood of my colleague's office had changed since the last time I had been there. There seemed to be a vaguely feminine touch to the environment, although it was hard to pin down. My colleague must have fallen in love!

On the wall above his desk hung a monstrous beetle of the sort that lives somewhere in the Southeast Asian archipelago which dines on small jungle rodents, a distant relative to a much smaller beetle commonly found in Eastern Europe. It was about fifty centimeters long and it was skewered onto a backing board with a twelve inch nail. Not a pretty sight. Below it on a shelf was a beautiful Japanese knife in a scabbard. The knife and the beetle looked a lot like they could fight each other to a draw.

"Let's see if I can find it under all this mess," he reported to me, carelessly.

"Any professor worth their tenure will always know where any one thing is, no matter how disordered the mess of their surroundings are." I was testing him.

"Certainly. Here it is. Would you like to take a look at it?" he asked. Without saying anything I reached for the manuscript.

It wasn't too heavy and seemed rather greasy and worn, with the leathery quality of old paper. I flipped through a few pages, water and ketchup stains catching my eyes as the only glimpses of color.

"Well," I said, "this looks quite good. I'll just take it to my office for a while to look it over, okay? I think it might take me a while to read through and find what I can make of it."

"No, go ahead, take your time."

"You don't mind, really? How did you get a hold of it anyway?"

"Well, I'm not sure I want to get into that right now, it's really rather an embarrassing story. Let's just say I came across it while rummaging through some junk at a garage sale."

"Coy to the end. Very well. Give me a couple of days, and I'll see what I can do."

"You mean a couple of weeks, don't you?"

"Actually, yes. Months. Years."

"All right, have fun. See you."

"Yes. See you."

Covering the path back to my sanctum sanctorum I was rather trembling with the excitement that I didn't want to let on in my colleague's office. Did he have a clue about what I was thinking about? What he had given me was something with this title:

The Metamorphosis by Franz Käfer The title stirred something in me, and I felt like things were clicking into place, as if a grand consolidation of literature was happening somewhere in my mind. Franz Käfer was a name that dug back to the very beginning of my most recent incarnation and present career as a scholar. I had heard the name first when I was in grade school, in the years when I had the most interest in my subject and was thereby most influential, the years that made clear to me how little I knew and how much I truly desired to know. The name Käfer was introduced to me by my American History teacher, who had some interest in recent European history. I had actually kept in touch with this teacher for some time after I left the school where he taught, but had lost contact some years ago. I had recently come across a professor in the German department at a nearby university while at a conference on comparative literature and metaphysics who was researching this writer, although he seems otherwise to be practically unheard of.

Franz Käfer was born, raised, lived, worked, went to church and died within the same fifty mile radius of a certain town. It was a chaotic area, as it was in a part of a country that bordered Germany that had a very large German minority, which included Käfer himself. During the war, his city was invaded by Germany for reasons of nationalistic justification. Käfer was conscripted into the army for similar reasons, and he was never heard of again. It is assumed that he died in the war. There are several rumors about the cause of his demise, but the truth of the matter is quite unknown. Although I had never read any of his writing, my impression of it from others was that it reflected the anarchy, paranoia, and surreality of those unsure prewar societies where reality was the one thing that was completely arbitrary.

The book began like this: Chapter Zero: Cockroach Descending a Staircase

Samuel Gregorska woke from uneasy dreams to find that he had been transformed into a giant cockroach. The first sensation he had as he woke was of an incredible fire in his lungs, and he spent his first waking moments in an intense hacking and coughing fit. As it was his particular habit to sleep on his stomach, he didn't even notice his strange new condition until he tried to get out of bed, and realized how difficult it was to stand on his hind two legs - his center of gravity having been altered considerably in this incredible transmogrification.

Gregorska lived alone. And as he did first thing every morning, he shuffled over to the sink. This day he scuttled on his six legs, used his antennae to feel his way up to the sink where he could look into the mirror, splash water onto his gritty face, and try to wake up. He reached over to his bedstand and threw down the remainder of the glass of cheap vodka that he had been drinking the night before when he passed out. It didn't taste any less horrible then than the previous evening when it had been relatively fresh. He grabbed for a toothbrush and began to

scrub his teeth furiously, hoping to remove any of the alcohol stench from his breath, however temporarily, so that his office colleagues wouldn't perceive his affliction so obviously, he didn't want to be so blatant in announcing his vices.

He wandered aimlessly around, his six appendages clicking rapidly on the ground, trying to remember what he must do. As he circled, the bed, the chair, the door, the sink, the table, the night stand, the bed, they all became a blur as he tried to adjust to his segmented eyes. Each image was faceted and they had to be encoded and analyzed in the central processing unit of his brain. "What to do, what to do - oh my, what to do. I can't remember anything." He sat down, stood up, sat down, stood up. His antennae spun crazily: he was nervous, he was frustrated, he couldn't sit down. With that he slurped up some leftovers that were sitting on the table, and then got ready to leave for work. His socks stuck oddly to the barbs of his legs, and he didn't have enough of the same color to fit onto his six legs, so he took them off. His underwear wouldn't fit, nor would his pants. It was fruitless trying to struggle into his suit jacket, and he lacked an apparent neck to fit his bow-tie around. The leather shoes would just fall off of his feet. He began to wonder if he could go into the outside world like that. Would the world tolerate nudity in cockroaches? And how would he explain his new appearance to his co-workers? This thought troubled him, but not as much as the thought of being late for work. The idea of being truant from work never even entered his imagination. He grabbed his attaché case and was ready.

It took him five minutes of fiddling with the locks and handles before he could leave, his fore appendages not entirely suited to the devices of closure. The door creaked open, and he paused suspended in the doorway as he looked back to see if he had forgotten anything. No, nothing.

It took another five minutes to close and lock the door. Having done that, he couldn't decide what to do with keys, since his naked armored body lacked pockets to put small items like keys into. This troubled and distressed him. He spent several minutes fretting and wondering what to do. Should he give the key to the landlady? No, never give your key to someone else. But she already has a spare key anyway. Well what if she's not in when he comes home? Maybe he could hide it in a garbage can where nobody would come across it. But what if someone threw out the garbage and the key with it? That day wasn't garbage day, but you never know when people will deviate from a schedule for whatever reason, as unpredictable as those other people are. What to do, what to do. Time was wasting, he had to get to work. People were passing him in the hall, they would have a head start on him. What to do. He finally resolved to find a moment when nobody was looking and then find a place to put it stealthily under the doormat. Yes, that was what he would do. It felt rather daring.

Finally he began to go down the stairs, trying to adjust to his new center of gravity. He had to go down six flights of stairs, each one with its 11 steps. One, two, three - aah! Falling!! He tumbled down seven stairs until he reached the landing. His carapace took most of the force when he hit the landing, but his head was pressed up against the wall as his body came to rest. No matter, he had felt almost no pain, but he was in an awkward position. Picking himself up, he continued down, this time going backwards down the stairs. It felt particularly eerie, especially since he couldn't see what he was going towards in the murky light of the stairwell. Nevertheless, he pressed onward, down the stairs he know so well, always wondering which of his neighbors he'd meet as he went. Finally, he made it to the bottom without having to brush against anyone else, which was a small relief. Any sense of gratification was broken when he heard his landlady, on duty at the bottom of the stairs, reminding everyone that the next day was

the first of the month and rent was due.

"Mr. Gregorska."

"Yes," he replied.

"Mr. Gregorska."

"Yes," he repeated.

"Mr. Gregorska, why won't you respond?"

"But madam, I did respond. I said 'yes.'"

"Mr. Gregorska, I don't care if you say anything, but I know that you can hear me - your rent is due tomorrow."

"Yes, of course, I have already prepared your money. I will give it to you tomorrow morning."

"What? What? Speak up, I can't hear you. I do say, you're acting very strange Mr. Gregorska. Do you drink? And why were you walking down the stairs backwards? Do you have a fear of heights?"

"Thank you madam, but I really must be off to work. Being detained in conversation is no longer a legitimate excuse for tardiness. Good day."

"What? What? Oh, good riddance to you, you nuisance."

The bus stop was five blocks down the street and Samuel tried to walk as fast as he could. Skittle, skittle, skittle, he was passing people carrying their attaché cases, they too were heading for the bus stops. Finally he was there, and he had just missed the bus, so he waited fifteen minutes for the next one. He paid the fare, moved to the back of the bus, and sat down...

That was how the book, the novella, began. It continued on, with fastidious detail about the rituals of Gregorska's daily life, of his trip to the office, descriptions of his work method, his work ethic, his environment, his superiors, and of the hardness of desks and chairs in his particular office. It struck me as rather odd that there is no description of his work colleagues. There was also no description or mention of any acquaintances, or even of his family. It struck me as very peculiar. I needed to know more, and I began to plan very deliberately how I should approach the research to this work.

My first order of duty was to write to my former history teacher, the one who had first mentioned Käfer to me. I had to resort to sending the letter to the most recent address I had of his, which I hadn't written to or heard from for several years. The last that he wrote, he told me that he was frustrated in his endeavors teaching in a public school. I knew that he was unhappy, as someone who had known the world and was trapped in a job in the bureaucratic machine, and from what I could infer it had affected his health. He was a conspiracy theorist, and was particularly afflicted by the realization that the military-industrial complex that controls the world and commands the greatest proportional budget also requires the smallest of support staff, which in no way interfaced with the public education system. I hoped that he had not moved on without warning me, making my efforts in vain and depriving me of any clues he might have for me. I decided not to mail the letter until the next day, when I might have something else to tell him about my preliminary searches.

The second stop was to look for my professor of German who had also written something on Käfer. I walked over to the faculty parking lot where my car was located and drove over to the neighboring town and the university where that professor worked.

Once on campus, I oriented myself and walked over to the building where his office was located. It was a pleasant walk, especially since it was the summer time and there were few

students on campus. The wind blew between the buildings and the trees carrying their own melange of secret scents - I could never identify things with my nose the way I could with my eyes.

I entered the building in question and made my way through the lobby, with its empty glass cases that normally contained the obligatory but often ignored information displays, the text as dry as the dust that settled on the yellowing pages, rust from the staples dying the paper peculiar shades of ochre or crimson.

Once I reached his office, I saw the sign on his door that said "Apoligis, I won't be in mo offic today. ples see secretary." This was enough for me to suspect that I should have called first before making the trip. This was confirmed when I walked over to the depart/mental secretary's office and saw a similar sign "closed until 4:00." A plaque noted that the secretary's regular hours were until 4:30 in the afternoons. I decided to try to begin research in that university's library, and to make a point of trying to be at the office some time between 4:00 and 4:30. The margin of error was great, I hoped that I'd make no mistake.

My searches in the library proved to be fruitless. This was unfortunate: the library files contained nothing written by him or about him, either in anthology or independently. I tried looking in the CD-ROM bibliographies. I tried several different bibliographies, including specialized ones on German Literature and on East European literature, on 20th century literature and on Contemporary European History, but there was nothing to be found of Franz Käfer.

Looking up at the time, I noticed that if was already past 4:00, just a few minutes short of 4:30 in fact. Fearing of the possibilities of being late, I dashed out of the library feeling rather foolish, hoping that I wouldn't be perceived as a stressful undergraduate...

I arrived at the office rather winded, sweating at my brows and under my clothes, but the air conditioner soon had me comfortably acclimatized. I walked up just as the secretary was pulling the door shut behind her, her bag over one arm, a bunch of keys jingling on the other. "Excuse me madam," I announced. I gave her my name and inquired about the professor I was looking for.

"Sorry sir, he's in Eastern Europe doing research. He's on his sabbatical, you know."

I was shocked, the setback was incorrigible. "But I was reading the note on his door, I thought that he just wouldn't be in today. What do you mean he's on sabbatical?"

"I'm sorry, but he is, he's on sabbatical! I wouldn't make this up. Why would I want to make it up, sir? That note is probably several months old. Or perhaps there's someone using his office while he's away, and that person put the note up regarding him- or herself."

How misleading, I thought. "Well, I was wondering if I could trouble you for his address, it's important that I get in touch with him." I also told her that I was from out of town and would only be there for the day.

"Well... well, alright. Just a moment as I unlock my office."

Sulkily, she pushed the door wide, turned on the lights in the darkened office, and walked over behind her desk. Rummaging around in a monstrous filing cabinet, she pulled out a huge binder that looked like it must weigh about the same as a large rock. She placed it on top of the filing cabinet and opened the binder, the front cover thudded on the filing cabinet like the footstep of some giant Precambrian (?) beast. From a neat little pile on her desk, she whisked up a delicate sheet of note paper, scribbled something and gave it to me.

"There you go. He should be there for another six months at least."

"Thanks. I also wonder if you could tell me in what journal he published a piece on someone

called 'Franz Käfer.' I know that he had prepared something."

"Well really, you know, he sends so many different things away to so many different places, that I don't remember any specific manuscript. I'm also the secretary for several other professors, so I'm afraid I can't really help you." But as an afterthought she added, "... but when did he tell you that he had this piece ready for?"

"It was for last year some time, February I think."

"I seem to remember that he submitted something for publication last February, but it was rejected by several journals. Can you imagine? A tenured professor's work being rejected by so many different publications?"

"No, madam, I can't," I muttered, not really certain what I should do with all this bad news.

I headed over to my university and wrote a quick letter to that professor, added some information about my fruitless preliminary research to the letter I had started to my teacher friend, and then went over to my university's library. The sun had gone down, and it only detracted from my mood, which was less than cheery. I began to look through some other indexes that the other library didn't subscribe to that I thought might contain information in this field, but I was very lackluster in my efforts, flipping pages dejectedly, scanning lists and indexes without enthusiasm, and humming sad dirges as I continued my melancholic labor of forgotten love.

At some point past 9:00 I realized, as I broke out of a long spell of blurred gazing at a sea of words on the page of some greasy volume, that my torpor must surely be the result of partial dehydration and hunger, the result of long tiring hours spend in fruitless activity. My mind and body craved fuel. I decided to go home.

Once there, I spent five minutes heating up some leftovers, which I washed down with a cheap local beer. The dishes were left on the table, and I stumbled over to my unmade bed and fell into a very deep sleep of my own.

While I slept I became aware of myself.

I had turned into a giant vermin, some sort of Teutonic Ungeheuer. I seemed to have just woken up and was in my bedroom inspecting my peculiar condition, trying to read a book, exasperated at my inability to pick it up with my slender forelegs. Finally my parents and my sister came into the room and started screaming and hitting me. I tried to talk to them, but they couldn't understand what I was saying. I couldn't even hear my own voice in this dream. They closed the door and went away, coming back only periodically. I had the sense that a great deal of time was passing, and I was exceedingly bored. I paced the floor; I paced the walls, and I paced the ceiling. I walked a track across one floor, up one wall, across the ceiling, and down another wall. Finally my parents brought my fiancée into the room. She was enraged, and she called me a useless impotent. She told me that the only honorable thing that I could still do would be to commit seppuku. I hesitated, and then she cut out my sex organs.

I awoke with a start from these uneasy dreams to find myself covered in a thick sheath of sweat-soaked clothes. My whole body was chilled and freezing; the first thing I did when I could stand was to strip off all of my clothes. I threw them against the wall where they stuck momentarily and then peeled off slowly, dribbling down the wall to lie in a shapeless heap. Without clothes my body felt ironically warm, and just as I was beginning to notice stirrings of liberation, I was chilled again with the paranoid feelings that someone could be watching me. Although it was unlikely in my apartment, considering the low lighting and the average human being's relatively weak eyesight, there was the possibility - however remote - that someone that I

couldn't see could see me. It was one o'clock. I dressed and, shivering ever so slightly, walked over to the cabinet where I store all of my big bottles of liquor. I removed a bottle of fashionable vodka I had recently bought, placed it on the table, and started to re-read the manuscript for my novel drinking shots of the spicy liquor. I did this for an hour or two until the distinction between waking and sleep became so blurred that I resolved to succumb to sleep. That night I had no more dreams.

The next morning I picked up all of the previous days projects approximately where they left off. I sat down with my detective novel for several hours, I looked at the Metamorphosis manuscript, I continued to research at the library, and I finished the letters that I had started the day earlier. It was a dreary day, and continued to drizzle unabatedly. I phoned all of my colleagues who were still on campus who might know something on the subjects that I was researching. Some of them seemed to remember something, but their knowledge was always very vague, and they could never find the texts that they thought they had in their offices that might be useful to me.

I continued to read from the Metamorphosis. Chapter 1: work for freedom

Gregorska's colleagues looked at him strangely. None of them would eat at the same table as him, or offer him food, or their hands. They seemed to be afraid that they could catch some strange disease from him. It was the fashion of the time to wear gloves, yet no one in the office could afford to wear them regularly, so they never did. This made people fear him more.

As he rode the tram home that night, Gregorska noticed for the first time that there were others like him in the same tram. He wondered what this meant. Were they always there and he never noticed them, or had they just recently begun to ride on that particular streetcar, he wondered. Gregorska spent some time debating whether or not to go over to them and ask them the questions that were plaguing him. Eventually the decision was made for him, as the trolley arrived at his transfer. He couldn't stay on the bus and go past his station for the sake of curiosity. He'd have to pay the fare again, a couple of groschens, and have the inconvenience of doubling back. Curiosity was an expensive indulgence.

On the other streetcar he heard some of the passengers talking about how people had been turning into strange vermin, strange beasts, strange Ungeziefer. He assumed somehow that they were talking about him and others like him. The discussion in particular that Gregorska was overhearing was between two elderly gentlemen - one was tall and thin with a long white beard, and the other was short and thin with a short gray beard. Both of them were wrapped neatly in long black coats, bowler hats perched perfectly on their heads. They were discussing these new vermin, about the morality of their existence, if there was a historical precedent to their existence and if there was any possibility of harmonious co-existence. They also began to discuss the violence against these new creatures, and the fear being expressed that they were attempting to blend into the world of normal people with the intention of one day using them and feeding off of them. One gentleman agreed with the attempts of some to crush the new vermin, the other disagreed with violence, and that they should be allowed to incorporate into the new societies of the future, the ones that were being planned covertly, that would one day cloak society in justice and unanimity.

At that moment, the two gentlemen noticed that Gregorska was listening in on their conversation, and they discontinued their argument. They stayed on the tram for several more stops and got off.

Gregorska was left alone on the tram. He drifted along on the route that carved a swath

between the gray soot-covered buildings. A cold wind wafted through a window that someone had left open and slapped his face in irregular pulses. Through the dimness of the winter twilight, he perceived that the streetcar was approaching his stop, and he pressed the signal to indicate that he wanted to disembark. The trolley went past his intended stop, and finally halted at a point half a block away from the sign. The driver hauled on the door lever, muttered a savage curse, and stared grimly at Gregorska as he scuttled down from the car.

It drove off with a great surge of the engine, trailing a pillow of black smoke as it tore down the street away from Gregorska. Just as he was gathering his packages together, a small, pale child walked past Gregorska and hissed. He looked back to watch the child as he walked past, and saw the child pick up and run without looking back. Curious, Gregorska thought, curious, curious, curious.

Entering his apartment house, he once again encountered his landlady on the landing as he began to move upstairs. Her complaints echoed those of the morning. She was still asking for the rent, her shrill notes echoing up and down the stairwell, producing an unbearable sonic effect. Gregorska tried to console her, telling her that he hadn't received his salary yet for the month, that it was late, and how he hoped that she would understand his embarrassing situation, and accept his promise that she would be paid as soon as he was. "Don't pretend that you don't know what I'm saying, because I know that you understand me. I know that you understand me. I know that you understand me," she pined.

Gregorska struggled up the stairs, although in his condition it was much easier to go up the stairs than to go down. The poles of the hand railing twirled vertiginously above and below him until he stopped, having reached his apartment. He groped in the darkness for his hidden key, and fumbled with the lock.

Once in, he moistened a piece of bread for dinner, which he ate quickly. Then he curled up on the floor and slept a troubled sleep, one that would not be broken until morning. While asleep he became aware of himself dreaming - he was on trial, he was human again, and the prosecutor was taking a great deal of time to list his crimes: distancing himself from his colleagues, insulting his superiors, being insubordinate, being redundant, repetitive, contentious, trite, boring, facetious, ungrateful, servile, spineless, reclusive, obtrusive, secretive, compulsive, impulsive, paranoid, and writing colorless reports that confused and misled....

This tale was becoming more and more familiar to me as I read and re-read it on occasion. The style was fluent, if uneconomical, and the situations and descriptions of thorough paranoia fascinating. Just how fascinating it would be to me I had yet to completely discover.

The look out the window in the fall was quite uncommon - falling leaves created a vortex of sorts as the wind pushed them together in a column of air. Whirling, pushing, they flew all over the world, slapping the window of my office, and then continuing their fatal descent. It was apparently the belief of the original inhabitants of that region that under certain conditions, the wind could sustain a leaf in the air eternally, as it drifted from one air current to another, traveling the vast emptiness above the Earth until it was fated to fall, however the gods willed it. Somewhere in the nether worlds there existed a tree with leaves of heavy black tar and, likewise, its leaves would fall off and be pitched about. It was the responsibility of any warrior who traveled out of the protection of his native village to always be on guard for these black leaves, which hostile spirits would use direct towards the warriors. If winds could blow one of these leaves onto the back of a careless or luckless warrior, the poisons of the black leaf would seep into his blood, and bring him a slow death through insanity and strange sexual deviancy. The

warrior, no matter how strong, would become obsessed with bizarre cravings that involved the piercings and colorings of the skin, the replacement of patches of soft skin with hard armor, and other such otherwise unimaginable matters. Many such infected warriors would be stalked and killed by the enraged fathers, brothers, and spouses of the mad warrior's sexual victims, the ones that had been operated on, sex-changed, amputated, had their insides exchanged with plastic organs, or had extra genitalia rhinoplastically molded out of empty patches of skin, and similar strangeness. I'm not sure if I believed this myth, but I was surely in no position of intellectual authority to condemn it outright. Sadly, these original inhabitants were killed off, extincted in a time of colonial savagery.

My research on Franz Käfer had almost ground to a standstill. I had been unable to find any more information about him through the usual channels, and I had in fact almost forgotten him completely.

Part of the problem was that my only real proof of his existence lay in the actual manuscript: letters to my teacher came back stating that I was using an incorrect address, as did those to the professor in Germany, which said that the address I was using did not exist. The secretary with whom I had spoken in his department at the other university was on maternity leave, and the new secretary knew nothing about him or his whereabouts. Just as people appeared in my life, they also withdrew. This was no consolation at all.

My novel had made some progress, as I was just in the midst of writing a new chapter. I found that the most natural way to develop my writing was to study the students in the classes that I taught - it was a relatively untapped creative resource, in my eyes. I could also profile the students who came to visit me during my office hours, and try to form a composite character of the typical student by studying these people's mannerisms, personality traits, and physical quirks for extreme accuracy. By doing this, I could create a blueprint of the couple in question, thereby insuring that they were completely fictional yet also believable, capable of a real existence somehow. I organized their details in folders that outlined their family histories, their psychological profiles, living arrangements, sex lives, even their class and work schedules. Naturally, the character of my teacher would only be learning about these people piece by piece, item by item. For example, he would learn much more about his female adversary, the oriental woman, than he would about her male counterpart.

I made her to be a very plain student who rarely spoke and didn't seem to have very many friends away of her boyfriend, with whom she was always seen. She wore thick cherry red boots, and black jeans that had a big black belt with a large, fashionable belt buckle. She had a gray sweater that she seemed fond of wearing, and on brisk days she wore a black pullover jacket that had a hood on the back. She liked to read European existentialist authors, she always wrote in green pen, chewing on the end but taking careful notes. She didn't chew her nails. She tended to doodle in class: the usual green skulls, or daggers that dripped green blood that students seem to enjoy drawing in class. She never came late, and she never handed in homework assignments.

The boyfriend was another matter. He seemed to be a carbon copy of his girlfriend, outwardly, while he exuded a kind of Teutonic gravity that seemed almost cliché. His character was relatively flat to her round one.

I was occupied with these thoughts when my colleague came knocking on my door.

RAT-TAT-TAT. "Can I come in comrade?"

"Ah, yesss, please do. Have a seat."

"How goes the paper chase?" he queried.

"Not very good, as can be imagined."

"How so?"

"Well, I haven't been able to find any of the information about Käfer that I've been looking for."

"But did you enjoy the story?" he asked me.

"Oh, yes I did, but it's not enough to just know the story, I have to know about the story as well."

"Well," he started slowly, with the air of someone who is clumsy about changing subjects, "then I wonder if you'll be glad to hear about this. I wrote to one of my colleagues in Africa, regarding that fellow I was telling you about, and he's written me a bit of a letter. I'm afraid that there's good news and bad news about him. Do you want to hear the news?" he asked coyly.

"Yes. Please."

"Well, this fellow is no longer in that country, so my colleague doesn't have any recent first-hand information. That's the bad news. The good news is that we now know at least a little bit more about who he is than we did before. Apparently he's originally from North America. I'm not entirely sure exactly where, but it doesn't really matter much, since he travels around so much. He went to high school in Europe, where he got to know many people from around the world, in particular a very good friend from that African country; this friend was someone I knew personally, by the way. Nevertheless, this fellow went to university in North America to study journalism, interrupting his studies periodically to travel in Europe and Asia. Apparently he knows a handful of languages, and rather proficiently too, from what my contact could discern. After he graduated from his university, he poked around the world, traveling to severally countries and working in a variety of occupations: most commonly as a teacher or journalist, although there is some rumor that he has some experience as an intelligence gatherer - a spy! This allegation is naturally unsupported..."

"Otherwise you wouldn't have told me that it was a rumor," I added, rather hastily.

"Exactly," my colleague said slowly, "...by the way, do you mind if I smoke in here?"

"No, not really. But I didn't know that you smoke."

"Well, it's no secret really, although I'm hardly what you'd call a habitual smoker. I make a New Years resolution every year to start smoking, but I can never stick to them, since I keep quitting. No will power... so to speak."

"That makes absolutely no sense!"

"Actually, it does. But never mind that, there's more to this story naturally."

"Naturally!" I added.

"Naturally," my colleague said smoothly, laboring over the butt of his cigarette, trying to get his lighter to work. "Our friend, it seems, eventually landed in the African country of his high school chum, and they lived together for some years. He was working as a clerk in an embassy, trying to keep a low profile. It seems that he was on the run, having started some kind of controversy in one of the countries where he lived, the details of which I'm not really very clear about. Had something to do with certain newspaper articles he had written while working in that country as a journalist, certain truths he held to be self-evident, and certain things about his wife's family, and their history in that country. Nonetheless, officials in that country had an interest in questioning him, if not charging him with a few particular infractions of their... ah... legal code."

He paused for a few minutes. He seemed sleepy, as if he was about to tell me that he was too tired to continue.

"Anyway, after a few years in that country - which was also the time I knew him, or at least knew of him - he disappeared with his whole family: a wife and five children. For a while nobody knew where he was, but apparently he's recently turned up in the country Hegemonia where he has quite amazingly become a minister of information."

"Hegemonia! Where on Earth is that exactly."

"You don't know about it? Not many people here have heard about it, and it is always a surprise to people that is a very old, very populous nation that is actually a conglomeration of many smaller states and former city-states. That area has a fascinating history, you should find out more about it. It's also been in the newspaper quite a bit recently due to the intense tribal strife that has been plaguing it, a problem rather endemic to countries of that region. You should really know about it. Anyway, apparently our friend now goes by the name A. Priori."

"A. Priori? That doesn't sound like a real name, it must be contrived. It's not at all suitable to the person you have just been describing. That also doesn't make any sense."

"Well, whether it makes sense or not, it's his name I'm afraid," my colleague responded coolly. "And if it's a contrived name, well, he wouldn't be the first person to use an alias. In fact, I understand that in some cultures it is expected to have at least two names to go by, depending on situations. I too have an alias, which is appropriate to my field of study. Don't you have one?"

Naturally, I had a few, but I made a new one up on the spot just for the sake of lying to my colleague, whose calm tone was beginning to make me feel strangely uneasy. I despised the irony.

"Anyway, that's about all I know, chum. I'll let you know if I find out any more, but our friend seems to be a bit of a celebrity in his own way, so it might give you something else to research. All right, I'll be off. Take care, carpe diem in your caveat emptor and all that."

"Ditto," I said fondly, glad to see him off.

My colleague was right, though, as there was some information in the newspaper fairly regularly about this lookalike of mine, although there was almost no information on Hegemonia as a nation, since its modern history as a nation had begun quite recently. There was some history of ancient versions of the country, as well as individual profiles of the states and city-states that it had confederated out of, but nothing very helpful. The largest gap came in the lack of any photographs of my friend A. Priori, Minister of Intelligence for the State of Hegemonia. My next move would be to try to find some kind of an embassy of Hegemonia... I called around, got the address from the phone book, fired off a letter, and waited for my response. Nestled in, I expected a long wait at least.

While I was waiting, I decided that there were a few things to do. One of them was, if I had time, to write more of my detective story, a loving little project that was easy to neglect. I was trying to find new, creative ways to build up my character's paranoia, without resorting to the obligatory triteness of hackneyed expressions. Eyes of Haken.

The other occupation would be to look once more at Kä_fer's manuscript. I mixed myself a strong drink and poured it into a plastic sports container with a long wiry plastic straw and then dug the story out of the files where I had put it. I opened it up to the page I had left off at, as always, neatly at the new insertion point - a new chapter heading. Chapter 2: Night

Samuel Gregorska went home. He arrived at the doorway of his tenement apartment. Having to bang on the door that stuck in its frame like an immovable object, Gregorska banged away for longer than usual, due to his strange new proportions, he no longer had the upright leverage that would have been helpful in forcing the front door open.

As he entered the dark passageway, he pushed the door shut behind him. Another door opened, and coming out of a halo of light was his landlady, ready to accost him once again.

"Are you taking alcohol up to your room, Mr. Gregorska? What's in that package." Samuel couldn't bear to face her, or to reveal the contents of his packages so he rushed up the stairs, instantly regretting his first outward display of rudeness to his unbearable landlady.

"I will expect your rent tomorrow, Mr. Gregorska, or I will have to take action," she yelled up after him.

He moved up the stairs, passing low on the steps, the bars of the guard rail flashing by him like the gates of a prison. He made it up to the sixth floor, severely winded, but happy that he had been able to move down from his old room on the thirteenth floor. Feeling about on the landing, there was his key, right where he left it, right under the door mat, in the bottom left corner, closest to the staircase where he could snatch it up as quickly as possible. "Impressive verisimilitude," I thought to myself as I read, making a note in the margin in pencil, "despite the apparent absurdity of its fundament."

Once in his apartment, he opened his package. It was a two liter bottle of vodka that he had bought the previous week at the sprits enterprise on Volk Street that he had just picked up that afternoon, rushing there after work with only a few moments to spare before it closed. He was luckier that day than he had been the previous week, when it closed just moments before he arrived...

A two liter bottle of vodka, it was rumored that at the bottom of such a bottle could be found a genie that would grant a wish. "Perhaps as I work towards emptying this, I'll be able to think of something to wish for." It was not that Gregorska did not wish for anything, but his imagination was limited to whatever seemed tenable, what he could apply to his life.

Once safely in his apartment, Gregorska began to hear a tapping. The sound was coming from the apartment above his. It followed no pattern, no rhythm, and would stop intermittently. He decided to try to forget about it and divert his attention elsewhere. First he closed the curtains of the small window in the one room he had. Although it was still light outside, was uncomfortable at the idea of someone spying on him, observing his deformity.

He reached into his attaché case, trying to grasp the newspaper that he had bought on his way home, that he'd yet not had the opportunity to read. Unable to grasp the newspaper with his long fore-appendages, the newspaper being either too slick, or too tightly wedged in the case, he became frustrated, and went over to lie on his bed. He wanted to take the bottle over to the bedside with him, but it was too heavy for him to carry easily. Instead, he picked up a dirty bowl that was still on the table from that morning's breakfast and poured some of the quicksilver liquid into it's curved surface.

Lying on his bed, he gazed at the ceiling, numb with exhaustion and the mouthfuls of vodka that he had already swallowed. He fell into a trance as he began to stare deeper and deeper at the ceiling, mesmerized by the stains and moles on its white surface, the workings of his newly developed eyes augmenting the myopic flatness into strange kaleidoscopic patterns. He soon became less aware of himself, and had he wanted to he could have floated above to regard himself in his grotesque form lying on the bed.

Instead, his reverie was broken by the return of the previous tapping, a strange pattern of light and heavy taps, over and over again in strange, meaningless, aggravating patterns. From up the stairwell came the voices of a man and a woman arguing in the language of a neighboring country, one whose inhabitants particularly appalled Gregorska's sensibilities.

Gregorska pushed himself off of the bed and crawled over to the table where he picked up his bag and turned it upside down, shaking, shaking, shaking it to dislodge it's crammed contents. Out sprinkled various pencils, erasers, pencil shavings, a pen, and a bottle of India ink that bounced off of the table, onto the chair, and then shattered on the floor. It was followed by dice, moldy uneaten lunches, an empty scabbard, a little red book, a small plastic chip, is 20-year old diary, a flask, a stack of papers, and finally, the newspaper that he had been looking for.

He read from it, scanning each headline, never anything new. Reports of the apparent prosperity of the country, optimism lined the familiar rhetoric of the helmsmen. Gregorska would read only the headline usually, or the first paragraph, and it would remind him of related articles that he had scanned weeks earlier. He never needed to read a whole article. He believed that if there was anything new, that it would be related in the first paragraph at least. But there was never anything new.

Finally, he came across a very small report that caught his interest. It unleashed his fantasy, and what he read appeared to be an article about strange creatures that had recently been appearing around the city. The creatures had not been seen since the last great war when they had either been destroyed, or had gone into indefinite hiding, so it was not known if these were new creatures that had come since the war, or if they were just reappearing. One of the lower helmsmen, a known historical revisionist himself, made the comment that these creatures were obviously the result of malicious foreign cultural influences that were poisoning the morals of our almost perfect society, and should be weeded out before they take root. This is what Gregorska read, what he perceived, and what he perceived to understand.

The night passed slowly, and the level of the liquid in the jar dropped slowly down, moving slower even than the hands of the clock that hung from the wall behind the bottle, its face distorted by the glass and the liquid inside. Gregorska would wait for the tapping to begin, speculate how long it would last, then when it stopped he could begin to wonder when it would start again.

At one point in the evening he saw visions. He might have been sleeping upright in his chair, or they might have been real, or they might have been hallucinations like the ones that he periodically suffered from. This one was the angel of the schoolteacher telling him about his sins, telling him that someday he could marry the person he loved truly. Suddenly, a cold draft moved through the building, and the angel was gone.

At 7 o'clock in the morning, Gregorska woke up from uneasy dreams to find that he was still a disgusting insect. He was almost dead, but he began to go through the work ritual that he had gone through so many times. This day would be no different than others.

I thought a bit about the character, and wondered about what could have influenced Käfer to write such a horrible book. Was he oppressed at home? Who did he love? Had he fallen out with some woman who now despised him? What other things had he written. Was he a solitary man as well, like his central character - in fact, the only character in this piece? Or was he more like myself, a solitary person who still had influences outside of my identity, however ones that I considered hot having a part in creating my identity?

At that point, I decided to pack up my affairs and head for home, the sun already having disappeared for the day, and my stomach growling for attention. I walked through the maze of my building of scholarship, emerging from the womb and tasting the chill of the cool night air that made me sweat, my body temporarily confused about its environment. The short drive home was topped off with an even shorter time when I prepared something quick for my hungry body.

I ate with the relish of a condemned man, and washed it all down with some more of the cheap local beer, the bare plastic bottles crying out their illegitimacy, or prematurity; the dubious nature of their ingredients, or the legal anonymity of the responsible brewer.

Lying on my bed, I began to think about the events of that day. One thing that had particularly struck me about my colleague's story was that it was not the first time that I had heard such a bizarre account of someone professing to know of someone with whom I had some similarity. There were the usual occurrences on campus of someone seeing me at a distance and walking towards me with an air of friendship, of camaraderie, only to have the look of recognition fade from their eyes as they'd get close enough to have a good look at my face; these once-eager shades would walk off in embarrassment, exasperation, or surprise. Once, at a part-time job I held in my undergraduate years at a student newspaper, three people confessed that they thought I was the spitting image of someone who had worked there in previous years. From what I could make out of their descriptions, they were all talking about a different person that I bore exact verisimilitude to. In cases like these, I adopted the habit of conjuring up the ghost of some long-forgotten high school classmate and make a game of telling these confessors how similar they in turn were to that person I had known, even if I myself knew that there was no similarity. It was a little trick I indulged in - the harmless deception of people through the testing of their gullibility, pushing the boundaries of what I could pass off as truth, or the creation of fantasies to captivate people by telling them what it seemed like they'd want to hear as an equal response of interest. I worked on the assumption that they were being sincere to me initially, but by having exclusive knowledge to the truth of the lies I was spinning, I could allow myself to feel smug. It was the same way, when I traveled, that I would introduce myself to different people I met in different countries by different names, never using the same name twice, fulfilling a kind of immature fantasy that had as its basis a dissatisfaction toward the insufficiency of the name I was given at birth. At the back of my mind was a persistent fear of karmic retribution for my action. It was abstract enough that I could disregard it as a legitimate threat, yet still consider myself to be living somewhat dangerously because of it.

Nevertheless, these were habits I grew out of eventually, my name fetish being the only remnant to survive in part through my toying with different pen-names. I usually disregarded these stories of lookalikes as either a coincidence, a mind game, or a case of unique perception, but one of these lookalike stories did stick out in my mind: in part because after I heard the story I continued to dwell on certain aspects of it, and I eventually incorporated some of them into one of my early books, one that was never accepted for publication.

It happened one year while I was on summer vacation during my first year at the university I was teaching at just prior to this one. I was in Korea traveling alone from city to city by train. Near the end of this trip, I found myself on a particularly long ride, suffering from advanced kimchi glottal burnout. The train was extremely crowded, but a space was made for me to sit with a teacher and several of his students. From what I could make out, the group was on a field trip somewhere to go fishing. The teacher offered me beer and cigarettes as he encouraged his students to test their language skills on me. The students - shy, but mischievous - would ask me seemingly strange questions like: if I had drank milk that morning, if my mother was pregnant, or if I feared assassination. As always it was difficult to compose my thoughts and do something that I needed to do with a small group of admirers discussing my every gesture amongst each other, the language barrier being almost as dense as the one that was dividing that country from its northern self. The train pulled into Gold Sun City and Gold One Star stop - I remember it

because of its curious name - and the whole group of students gathered their belongings and got off, smiling and laughing and telling me that they loved me, trailing garlands of litter as they left our cubicle.

My thoughts drifted back towards a book that I had perched on my lap for most of that ride, that I had yet to actually read from, due to the flurry of distractions that had just been provoking me right under my nose. I read with great enjoyment for what seemed like a long time, until I began to perceive the prickly, unmistakable sensation that someone was staring right at me from very close proximity. I looked up suddenly and seated across from me was a solitary American G.I. who was regarding me with a kind of curiosity not entirely different from that of the children who had just left. The more things change, it seemed, the more they remained the same.

The soldier then began to talk to me. He introduced himself and then he talked and talked and talked. He expressed to me his nervousness about traveling alone in a state where his country's military presence was a contentious issue and anything which reminded the people of past wars was entirely resisted, especially in those changing times where the need for such a presence seemed outwardly to be growing more and more obsolete, trite, redundant. Each smile was lined with ire, dripping with sarcasm, resentment, and each agreement emanated dissatisfaction. In an inverted world, he was glad to meet someone uninvolved, and to find a confessor who was not in uniform, as he considered his peers at times more dangerous than the perceived enemy - and much more real.

With the introductory preliminaries out of the way, he began to tell me a story that he claimed he had never told another person in the world, not even his superior officer, since it didn't affect the objective of the mission during which it had occurred, and was left out of his subsequent report as related to army discipline and the "don't ask, don't tell" policies. In this case, however, I was in the unfortunate position of someone who wasn't asking in the company of someone who was all too desperate to tell.

It seemed that some years before that, my traveling companion had gone on an undercover mission in a Middle-Eastern country, one that he could not name for fear of giving me knowledge that would put me in danger. His mission led him to infiltrate a gang of thieves in this country, and he was there for some time before the gang began to suspect him to be duplicitous, possibly by spying one day his pink circumcised penis, and the fuzz of blonde hair growing like pale clover around it. Mischievous, devious, and indirect, they cleverly plotted his demise by setting him up in an aborted cattle robbery. In a resulting shootout, the cow was killed, and he took the rap for the incident.

Seeing my raided eyebrows and look of incredulity, my friend paused for a moment to tell me that, as ridiculous and unlikely as it sounded, he surely lacked the imagination needed to invent such a humiliating incident about himself, and then have the gall to expect a listener to believe that such a thing had indeed happened to him. He also explained to me the irony of the fact that when off duty he prefers to be a vegetarian, shunning the meat and dairy products that he is forced to eat in huge quantities while on duty as an American military serviceman. Nevertheless, in this Arab court he was sentenced to be executed. He was to hang by the neck until he was dead.

It was the tradition of that country to have a practice execution before the actual execution, so this man was forced to experience the humiliations of being led to his death without experiencing the final release; and he told me about the pain of living with the experience since that day.

The following day, however, he had been set free on his own recognizance, under the

provision that he promise to report promptly to the capitol offenses liquidation center the next day at dawn for his real execution. This done, he wandered about town looking for some sign of Americanization to save him - an embassy, a trade office, a telephone, or anything written in English to return to him some sense of the North American savior, of liberty, of pure democracy. He went from place to place: lost, ravaged, humiliated, spiritually defeated, he was stripped bare of his sense of identity. He could have contemplated using his temporary liberty to escape his situation, but he would have had nowhere to escape to. The next day at dawn he found himself in a sleepless daze, his footsteps automatically directing himself into the city's capitol offenses liquidation center.

Once there, he reported to the center's manager, a beautiful veiled Arab woman. He stared, penetrating into the deep brown kohl-lined eyes: utterly enamored with his executioner, he regained a lust for life, a desire to survive at all costs: to grip this woman deep in his arms; to do all the things to her that he had been trained to as a man and an American serviceman; to gratify her in the most primordial ways; to form with her the most unbreakable, unalterable of attachments. Having regained vitality, he reached deep down into his self and used every imaginable device to win his freedom; every vestige of rhetoric, debate, erudition that he could conceive to win his freedom for the sake of loving this woman, finally converting himself to Islam right there on the spot. Eventually, after several lengthy appeals overflowing in erudition of every imaginable kind, the woman shyly said "O.K., you're free." At that point, the moment of rapture broke, and sensing that his words had made it through to her the undercover serviceman became very nervous. He began to suspect that she was married, and yet, that she had been won by his speech and was prepared to meet every one of his convictions with one of her own; and in spite of this apparent victory, he began to fear her: he began to fear the possibilities of attachment, of being owned and of owning, of having to learn the life history of another, of trying to understand another person's entire previous existence, of suffering for the sake of pleasure, of intertwining the threads of destiny and casting his future into the sphere of interdependence... of becoming someone's spittoon, and of having a spittoon of his own.

His fear of her grew exponentially, and after a few minutes of casual conversation, he found himself making vague plans to meet her later that night at a certain hotel, then walking out of the slaughterhouse. So close to Love, Sex, and Death in the same evening, yet never attaining either.

"It's the closest I've ever been to real love," he told me. "I haven't been there since, nor do I ever imagine to be there again."

Without pausing he began to relate to me the original purpose for telling me so much about himself, that it was to lead in to a greater explanation. His curiosity with me, and his reason for sitting across from me, was to begin this curious discussion and to tell me that I was the splitting image of his older brother, a man that he admired immensely.

His older brother and he had grown up together, except for two high school years when his brother had been in a private school in Europe. This experience changed the brother immensely. It happened when he was 15 years old, and his brother was 17; one day his brother and his father had a brief argument about the question of the existence of God, and the older brother darted out of the room. He was gone in a flash, and didn't return home that night. In fact, he didn't come home any night that week, that month, or that year. He was actually never again seen in that house. The family, suspecting in the first week of his absence that he would be back for his clothes and personal possessions, used them as bait and hid everything that he owned in a secure place so that he could not be able to steal them away, and would have to return home eventually

as a result. Among these possessions were his diaries, his clothes, his needles (he was diabetic), a quantity of some strange substance that he had collected while hiking in the Alps, his writings, his address book, a humble collection of strange insects, and his prized Meiji era Japanese-English dictionary.

For a month nothing changed, although the family could feel his eyes all over them as they came and went. They knew that he was somewhere about spying on them, trying to gauge out how to get what was his.

In the end, it was no use; he found out how to get access to his own possessions without giving up an ounce of his newfound freedom; holding the material essence of his identity hostage wouldn't catch him, in fact they never even saw him enter. The soldier confessed to me the location where these possessions had been hidden: he told me that they were first baked into clay jars, and then each jar was protected by a unique voodoo curse that allowed them only to be opened by the ones who sealed them, which in this case was his parents. The jars were then wrapped in cotton and sewn into a mattress that was them put on the parent's bed frame. This was all done with the utmost clandestinity, and then the mother and the father slept on the brother's possessions every night. For the daytime when they were away, they expected him, my companion, to do the duty. The bed was hard he complained to me and made me dream the most hideous nightmares, who knew what it was about the bed that was responsible - was it the contents of the jars, or the jars themselves with their strange seal. Finally, a point was reached when none of the three could bear to suffer sleeping on its harrowing spiritual surfaces, and they hired a blind mute Korean woman to lie on the bed during the day while they were all away. The woman was a seismograph, a human Geiger counter, who would shriek and flail out upon any disturbance. She was also available 24 hours a day, and for months she never left her post, her meals brought to her at regular and very quiet intervals. The family were also reassured that someone who could neither see nor speak would not be able to betray their intentions to anyone else - either vocally or in writing - and would also not quit a job that was providing as well as my parents seemed willing to give.

As he told this story, I could tell that the soldier was gauging my reactions, trying to perceive from my facial expressions, my appearances, my body language, and my general reaction to his story if I was in actual fact his real brother masquerading as a tourist in Korea. He wanted to see if I acted surprised, shocked, or alarmed, or maybe even relieved when he told me that there were no clues left behind, that the brother had made none of the mistakes that the family had hoped he would. I shuddered inside, but I betrayed no emotion as I listened to his tale of bizarre family torments.

Finally, the possessions were stolen - during the daytime that is, while the woman was lying on the bed. Nobody knows yet how it was done, but through the process the blind mute woman somehow regained the abilities to see and to speak, although she was driven somewhat insane both by the flood of perceptions and emotions, as well as the societal pressure regarding what to see, and what to say. She disappeared as quickly as my brother did after that. Poor woman - if it wasn't one affliction, it was another.

After this, his family gave up hope in one way or another, and the parents often told him that they tried every night to produce another son to replace the one that no longer existed in their eyes. The father eagerly discussed it in the tone of bragging, saying that through a special program of prayer and meditation, both inward and outward, an exact copy of the first son could be produced without the flaws of the original... but no new son appeared. No new daughter

either, at that. It was at that point that the man resolved to join the army: either to lose himself in his duties, or to use the cloak of darkness and the secret information services that the army has at its disposal to find his lost brother, whom no amount of investigation, political coercion, or public emotional blackmail could turn up.

It finally occurred that while overseas one day in an outpost in Taiwan, the soldier happened to be reading the country's English language daily newspaper when he spotted a picture of his brother. As amazing as it seemed, there he was in the picture: he had not changed outwardly, from what he could tell, and he looked the same as he had on the day that he ran away; and now he was writing for a newspaper. The picture was of a staff writer who had won some sort of award for one of his articles investigating local governmental corruption. He told me that he couldn't believe the coincidence: not only was it proof that the brother still existed in some form and hadn't disappeared literally, but the text below the picture gave him all the information he needed to find his brother. He immediately phoned the newspaper and asked to speak to his brother, the man pictured in the newspaper of a few days ago. He was told then that he could not talk to the man - no reason was given, and he was cut off.

Determined to find his brother, he bought a ticket to the capital city, determines to find the office of that newspaper and his brother to go with it. The search proved more difficult than he thought it would be, since very few local people knew anything about the newspaper printed in the language of foreigners. Once he arrived there, he began to inquire about the man in the picture, his brother. He was finally told by the newspaper's photo editor, a drunken Englishman, that what had happened was that the picture was taken without the writer's permission, and that once he saw that his photo had been published, he panicked: he tore up his work area, vandalized part of the newspaper office, and ran from the building never to be seen again. The editor pointed to new drywall that had just been put up in one of those areas, to show that he wasn't lying.

The soldier told me in great detail just how disappointed he was that he had lost the trail to find his brother, the brother that I so very closely resembled in almost every way. What was revealed to the soldier eventually at the newspaper was the fact that this writer, his brother, hadn't worked there for very long, that he was apparently a very private man, and that no one knew anything about his personal life. Even the editor knew almost nothing about the man who turned in excellent copy nearly every day - in a high pressure job he was just happy for at least one person who regularly submitted quality product. The only thing anyone seemed to remember about this man, this brother, was that his greatest fear was that his writing would sound contrived, convoluted, or over-written. And that he had a severe drinking problem.

So the search had run into another dead end. This was nothing new, but having come so far to run into another brick wall seemed even more frustrating to the soldier than knowing nothing.

It was many years later when the soldier picked up the trail for the last time. It started with a hunch that he should try to follow up on the blind mute Korean woman. He asked his parents to try to find out what had happened to her. They found out almost immediately that some time after the incident at their house she had recovered from her insanity, fallen in love with a local man, and ran off back to Korea to do political work. She began by making propaganda films for one of the Korean governments, but then while on a temporary sojourn in Taiwan, her partner developed a serious drug addiction. As a result, the two of them began to lead a dangerous life dealing in refugees, and helping groups of people move illegally and by any means necessary either way across the heavily militarized zone - depending on whatever group paid more. At

times, trips would fail, and whole groups of people would be wiped out by machine gun fire, shelling, mortars... decimated, eradicated as if they were rows of rounded pencil no. 2 bubbles on an exam form, erased with one swipe of an effacer. The man was finally killed in one of these raids as well, his addictions and afflictions ending in one instant shell explosion. The woman, driven mad with grief, lost herself in her opiates, finally driven blind again by these artificial body pollutants, and mad by the grief of having her country, and by extension her life, rent asunder by ideology. Her companion's body, that of my brother, was seized by the authorities across the border, and it is not known what happened to it. He was finally gone, gone forever, and after 20 years, the soldier finally knew what had happened to his brother. The woman still lived in the township of Gold Sun City and Gold One Star, and my friend, the soldier had just been there visiting her where she was staying with her family.

After all this, the soldier looked up and cried out loud that the train had arrived at his stop and that he had to go, frightfully sorry comrade, but at this time of night he wouldn't be able to find another train, that it would only wait for a brief moment. The train stopped and he darted off into night, leaving me alone with the amazements that someone who looked like me had led such an interesting, varied life, so rich in the clichés of 20th century Hollywood films. It had been a life of variety - loss and gain - compared to my extremely uneventful, untraumatic life. It made me wonder about potential.

Several months passed after that, months occupied in study, teaching, and the overall processing of the usual administrivia. I became very excited at one point in my research when I found what I thought might be a clue that would teach me something about the elusive Franz Käfer. It was in a manuscript from an existentialist philosopher from the Siberian Kiril islands called Sergei Voïdiov who had published a treatise on man's alienation from man, and uses as an example a man who is turned overnight inexplicably into an enormous moth. The man-moth, referred to in the text as a Mnotha (which I assume is a rough transliteration from Russian). He explains that a moth is like a man because it is born, grows as a despised worm, then undergoes the chrysalis stage that is likened to a man's education. The disappointing end result, the moth, is the ugly product of a long incubation period. The moth, additionally, is the poor cousin to the seemingly perfect butterfly, and is thus fallen from grace, realizing less than its potential. The final, rather weak comparison between humans and moths, is that moths are among the few beasts in the natural world prone to suicide, jumping into fire, the first extra-natural discovery of the primitive human.

One of the passages discusses the object, the alienated horrific man, after his transformation in reality to what he actually is in essence, can no longer function in society, and will inevitably be stripped of every tag that validates and justifies his existence in society, among them being a job, association, and a place to stay.

The theories excited me and I was egged on by the claim that Voïdiov had once visited the city where Käfer lived. I also thought that I could find some evidence in the manuscript, from which I was reading thoroughly. Chapter 3: the State Burden

Gregorska's days began to blur together. This was not new, because his days had always blurred together. He did notice, at one point, that it had been a very long time since he had seen any of the others like himself, even the shades that he thought that he had once seen on the bus. It became more and more troublesome to think about it. He knew that he was alone.

The surprise came at work one day. It had been quite a while since his transformation, and he was quite accustomed to his new body. He could do almost anything that he could previously do,

and even the people around him seemed to have grown accustomed to him, although he knew that he was still not trusted, that people discussed him in harsh whispers. This went on, but as long as he was praying that he wouldn't be harmed, he felt reasonably safe.

He was seated at his desk working his way through processing the forms that had been on his desk when he arrived at work that morning, when he looked up from the small white world of the forms and their black squiggles, to find a letter on his desk

Sir, It has recently come to our attention that your behavior, appearance, and conduct are not appropriate for one of your position. A great many of the administrators, as well as one of the governmental helmsmen, are very distressed with you. Your services are no longer needed or welcome at our esteemed company. Please vacate your space immediately and report to the police station to receive the decision on what is to be done in your case. Gregorska stared incredulously at the paper, the only communiqué he had ever received from the administration, or for that matter, from anyone higher than him in the company hierarchy. He would have felt proud if he wasn't so horrified.

At that point he jumped off of his desk, upsetting the pile of paper that he had just been working with. He delayed his protest to stoop down and organize the papers, putting them back into alphabetical order the way they had been, and then began to fret about, shaking. He got up, running between the desks in the sea of paper that he worked, asking, demanding that someone explain to him what the paper meant, the letter that he had received.

He could not find his supervisor anywhere, and every person that he asked pretended that they couldn't understand him and became very impatient with him. He ran about the room, close to a panic, until he realized that many people were looking at him curiously, upon which he became very flustered and felt like he had to sit down. He went back to his desk to try to calm himself down. When he got back to his work area, he saw that his whole desk had already been removed, he could still see two strong men in overalls carrying it off, grunting and struggling with its weight.

Gregorska ran after them, protesting. The two men turned their heads to look back at him. They stopped, put the desk down, and the one in back clenched a fist and struck Gregorska, hard. Gregorska, weakened by his meager diet, his strength ebbed to hollowness, felt the blow through his armor, and toppled over on his back. Then the two men picked up the desk and walked off.

Helpless, Gregorska rested on his hard carapace, unable to move. He remained there for many minutes, until he realized that he could use a ledge to pull himself up. Once up, he was so humiliated that he ran out of his office, never to be seen again.

I could see that there were some parallels between the manuscript. Unfortunately, my hypothesis was sabotaged when I learned that the author Voïdiov's works had never been translated into German, that he had only been in Käfer's city many years before Käfer had been born, and that his writings had only been exhumed and studied recently, after many years of being censored by the many succeeding governments of the region in which he lived. Ultimately, I was disappointed to concede that there was probably no way that Käfer could have read or been influenced by any of Voïdiov's work.

One day, by attention returned to the information that I had requested from the Hegemonian embassy in America (there wasn't one in my own country), and as I expected, the wait for my information package was formidable; but three months after I wrote my first letter, I held a picture of A. Priori in my hand.

It was amazingly ambiguous, merely a picture of an official military-looking chap wearing a military hat and very dark sunglasses. It could have been anyone, not necessarily anyone who even bore anything but the most basic of comparisons to myself. I considered requesting another photograph of this A. Priori, but the thought of having to wait another six months for a mere photograph sickened me, and I threw the photo into a desk drawer and forgot about it.

That night I felt the usual tensions of being in the midst of a thousand stimuli, each bringing with it its own unique brand of frustration, confoundment, or despair. And as is usual in these instances I opened the newspaper to look for some outlet to these frustrations, my eye drifting down to the concert announcements page. I studied the page with a disassociated interest until the edges of my vision began to blur, and I fell into a trance of semi- consciousness which led to an awareness of certain forces moving somewhere in the back of my head, forming a sphere of awareness that pulsated in strange Cartesian patterns. This lulling influence was countered by the caffeine element that had existed in my brain and bloodstream since earlier that morning, entwining itself around my thought patterns. In my trance I was aware of all this, at the same time that I was ignoring it. I was manifesting a strange biochemical duality, a duality that was singular of itself...

My reverie was broken by the electronic purr of my office telephone.

"Hello love, how are you."

"Ah yes," I recognized her voice. "Fine, thank you. And you?"

"Excellent."

"Long time no hear. Is there any particular reason you're calling me?" I queried, trying to blunt the standoffishness with a friendly tone.

"Yes, I have a break in my studies, and would very much like to see you tonight. I have a mission for us."

"What might that be."

"A spiritual psychological sexuo-political quest; to enter the bowels of the big city and to tear our ways out, to capture the ultimate experience and to see which one of us will escape unscathed," she explained in one long breath.

"Sounds challenging," I told her, at the same time that I was worried about the possibility of her being on one of her chemical binges.

"There's a concert I want us to go to tonight in the city. Are you up for it? And can you drive?" she asked.

"I'm sure I can drive. What concert would this be," I wondered, as my eyes drifted onto the page of concert announcements that I had open before me, feeling somewhat odd at the thought of being in the midst of an occurrence of coincidence, or possibly synchronicity.

"Can't tell you, you'll have to wait and see," the voice said. "Can I come over about 6:00. There's something else I need from you."

"That's fine," I said, this request being less of a mystery than the first one.

"Great. I'll bring dinner. Bye."

"Bye."

That night around 6:30 the doorbell rang. I had just been sitting at my word processor in my small basement office, working on my detective novel (which was taking me much more time to write than I thought it would) and listening to an old sound recording that I had dug up for the occasion, something that had been popular ten years previous, but was now considered passé, musically archaic, and generally unlistenable. I was feeling some anticipation towards the night's

activities, in spite of myself, and I had a great deal of nervous energy which I found surprising useful in being creative with respect to my book. I was just in the midst of an episode that dealt with the young couple in question in that story - I was just in the midst of writing a delicious love scene between the two when the doorbell rang. The music that I was playing surprised my guest, however, and she explained that the music we would be listening to that night would be very different indeed.

True to her word, she had brought dinner, a colorful selection of very expensive sushi, as well as a salad that she had created, some almond milk, and some rouladen. We ate the sushi with great relish, as well as a great deal of spicy green wasabe paste. We left the salad and the rouladen, and turned our attentions towards each other and certain curiosities, certain investigations of each others bodies...

We drove to the city in silence. The darkness of the car's interior was barely illuminated by the small green lights that came out of the dashboard to gauged various functions of the engine's furious, superheated chambers. From this vantage point it was easy to regard the surroundings with some distance; we were passing trees, forests, houses, and other cars, but along the whole stretch of highway it was almost impossible to see other human beings. If there actually was someone walking on the road on the other side of the highway fence, they would merely be a speck that became a blur as the car whizzed by; the faces of the people inside the cars around us on the highway were plastic, rigid, and hostile, not even really human. The sky was clear, as we passed an old ski hill: the trails carved out of the forests, the slim lines of chairlifts snaking above the ground, all rendered useless to the human owners by the lack of snow, and the complex waited for better times. It wasn't going anywhere as we passed it at a hundred and fifty kilometers an hour.

I often wondered what would happen to me if I were stranded at the side of the road on a cold night, how long I would have to walk in this part of the world before I found another sign of human life, some sort of shelter, someone who would give me a cup of hot tea. From my vantage point on the highway, there was no sign of civilization, and the trees showed the most real hospitality.

Finally, the buildings became more and more, and the car found itself snaking through the streets of the city. The traffic also increased, but I still couldn't see real people - the streets were bare. She gave me directions, and I sensed that we were entering a part of the city generally known as "low income", and the surroundings were adequately indicative of such.

We found an underground parking garage somewhere near the live house that was our destination, and I drove in. The machine dispensed a coupon that stated our time of entry, and we were in.

We walked hand in hand down the cold night streets for five minutes, pausing momentarily at red lights to wait for breaks in the traffic, and then dash across the intersection. The neighborhood was surrounded by some sort of irreverent graffiti: YOUR SEX LIFE IS IRRELEVANT REFUND YOUR PENIS DON'T TELL ME ABOUT YOUR ORGASMS STOP DESCRIBING YOUR GLEE SELF-LOATHING IS YOUR ONLY RECOURSE HOW MANY ENEMIES DO YOU HAVE? THE COUNTDOWN OF SANITY HAS STARTED THE GOVERNMENT WANTS TO SEE YOU CASTRATED None of it made me feel very safe. I felt polluted, clogged, and I had to wonder what the traumas of the author or authors could have been.

Noise began to grow - true sonic noise, the chatter of people, as well as some sort of

emotional noise. Once in the club, we were surrounded by the young and the old, sweating in unison, united in angst. To the left were grinning jackals covered in tattoos and leather, crazed looks in their eyes, feeding off of paranoia. In front were women and girls, dressed in tight jeans, leather, fur, cotton mesh, or plain t-shirts; long hair, short hair, nose rings. Emanating lethargy or fear, some kind of desperate hope lingered in their presence, some kind of hope or expectation of a realization of purpose. To the right were groups of youths in baggy cotton and denim, their eyes lit up with fear, or a desire to be shown a musical revelation, an answer to the future. A need to smoke more drugs.

The music was playing when we entered, music that growled like some large jungle cat, and lashed out at the senses. As we got closer to the back of the crowd that was seething and moving about by itself 20 or 30 meters out from the stage, my companion suddenly darted away from my side without saying anything, and melted into the crowd, her small body easily slitting between two others, and she was gone in the mass. I didn't see her for the rest of the concert, although there were times that I thought I saw her flitting across the top of the crowd, or dancing somewhere in the ocean of people.

I found a place to stand, somewhere behind the seething crowd, and didn't move for the whole evening. The crowd seemed to breathe like some huge dragon, and it moved as a whole with the beat of the music - fast. People were smashing into each other, clawing at each other's clothes. If someone fell down, they were helped up by strangers to rejoin the whole. Others would be vaulted up above the crowd, then be held up by dozens of hands and pushed forward towards the stage where they disappeared. While suspended above the ground, hands would pull at their clothes, at their boots, clutch at their buttocks and anuses, they would laugh and laugh and laugh. Other kamikaze divers would climb up on-stage and launch themselves into the crowd, or jump down from the balcony. It was hell, and everyone there had paid to get in.

On-stage, red lights flashed, and the foursome on-stage tore at their musical instruments the same way that the audience tore at each other. They belted out songs, yelled incomprehensible slogans, and acted like people in a besieged city trying to get out.

My heart raced, my mind reeled from a plethora of emotions. Fear was soon overcome by a devilish good humor, then by an incredibly creative energy that made me want to write out every aspect of my experience and discuss it indirectly with each person in the world who could understand me. I was angered and saddened, my body screamed out for someone to be with me, and I despaired at being alone. I wanted to dance, but it had been years since I had lost the ability to dance. I wondered when I could leave.

I looked around me to see who I was standing next to. I marveled at the collection of humanity gathered in one place, people that I had never seen before, and that I would only see in just such a place, who lived for such events, who disappeared into suburbia and anonymity at other times. I saw just to my left an oriental girl, she seemed like she was in her early twenties, and just like everyone else, dressed from head to toe in black. She looked at me, and quickly moved over and yelled something in my ear. Because it was so loud, I couldn't understand a thing she said, her words were drowned out into a garble, a slur of monosyllables. I sensed that it had something to do with the music, so I nodded gravely, and returned my attention to what was happening on-stage. When I looked back in that direction, I saw her talking to someone else, rather far away. After that, I never gave her another thought.

The concert ended some time around midnight. I tried to find my friend, but she was nowhere to be seen. After the band had left the stage, the lights came on, and people started to

pick themselves up and leave. Some were wringing out sweaty clothes, putting shirts back onto naked torsos, and such post-concert ceremonies. Soon the concert hall was almost half empty, but I couldn't see her anywhere. I felt lost, hopeless, and my only desire was to breathe fresh air, so I left the hall and began to look for her outside.

Once outside, I felt out of place in the crowd, barren. In particular, my whole body felt light, my mouth was dry, my clothes were sweaty and smoky, my body was parched. I wandered the streets, stumbling over empty bottles - as if in some nightmare vision - until I saw the neon sign of a local brand of beer, illuminated in the window of a bar.

Once inside, I slid up to the bar and ordered a beer. I drank about half of it and set it down on the table, already feeling somewhat nauseated. Almost immediately, as I began to return to my senses, I noticed the conversation of two young people who were seated next to me at the bar. They both looked quite young, almost too young to be served at that bar, and from their frazzled appearances, I believed that they had also been at the concert.

"I don't know anything, man, I don't know anything," one of them was saying. "Nothing at all. That's the thing you gotta do, you gotta save the destruction for last, when they least expect it. When the KR and CCP are dancing in their drunken stupor around the fire of their supposed victory, you attack at the base of their spines. Imagine that, these drunken fools becoming pools of deadness. The revolution has stopped, baby, while you were partying. The bottle of wine has been opened, and really it's all blood that's congealing around you. Make it happen, get your way out of it, and everything will be all right.

"Is it wrong to trick the violent into being peaceful, knowing that this will not dispel the ire from their hearts and will in fact only make their anger grow? To subjugate someone morally is a great crime and humiliation will force the strong willed to recoil and retaliate.

"What I see is... a middle class family wavering precariously on potential self destruction, the balance held unevenly by various hypocrisies, compromises, spineless, soulless, gutless, peace-preserving tactics, saving all from the full embrace of a desirable anarchy.

"The stage is set in the fragility of the middle class pseudo- status quo with the unsatisfied unnerved eponymous elder son and the resistance of his psyche to expose the farce in his surroundings for everyone to understand. To what gain? But the temptation exists, and grows each day that the foolishness remains. Under the veneer of family selflessness and honesty lies a phony hollowness of self-interest, inherent greed, and an attitude that there is nothing wrong in the environment.

"Below the shiny-happy goodness of those well off, and the discontent of those not-so-well off is the lie of gruesome middle- class values. With no authority or memory of anything besides their authority, the parents - the true leaders - are convinced of their integrity and wisdom, where there is no foresight, empathy, or understanding. No authority figures to make things relative to them: there haven't been for over 35 years.

"Convinced of altruism and glowing in his positive middle- class values, the younger son embraces his elders' middle-class identity like a sponge soaking up the water of the toilet bowl, eager for more of the same in his own future, content to lead life unquestioningly for the sake of a stable future, interested in the perpetuation of a flawed philosophy.

"There to stir up everything is the older son, the conspiracy theorist, the one who believes he has the vision to see through the wonderment of a seamless bourgeois livelihood (and where are they now?). Knowing that those closest to him are among the ones he relates to the least, he rehashes scenarios and questions commitments and principles and ideals and mixes them around

with what he thinks he knows of real life, and he comes up with what seems like a populist plot close to his own home, of the wretchedness of the comfortable.

"Gleaning all the most pleasant memories of post-war contructionism from their memories, the parents have watched the result of a fading economic opportunism fall short of their children's careers: the children are too late. Transposing their experiences onto their children they want them to make the same sacrifices that they did while adopting an attitude of 'the economy sucks, we're going on vacation.' We'll have to watch 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous' on TV alone. What could set it all to crumbling is... the disaster. First a small act of free will, then another, then aborted attempts at pan-generational reconciliation as the duress of youth under authority and the old way show signs of strain. A parent gives up hope, loses sleep, health deteriorates. The emotional stability is frail, almost not there. Who is to blame? A show of will is intolerable for the parent, whose health begins to suffer. One disaster is all it takes. It's only a matter of time. Once one person is made miserable by the chain of events, every one is miserable. But what is there to protest about? Could it be: the middle class' policy of economic superiority? While (a) they have more integrity than the rich money-grabbers who either inherit wealth or earn it too fast by deception and let it ruin their families or (b) they have more will, spunk, verve, temerity, force than the idle poor who linger in welfare lines, unable to train themselves as the skills they need to get somewhere. And what real skills do they have, those who have lingered for 30 years in a specialized career? Share the racism, the homophobia, the disgust of the pathetic lower classes... rip off the government that rips you off... oppose everyone who has weakness that you don't have... change the decorum to destroy those classes (it must be done democratically) by changing immigration laws, welfare laws... and impose the death sentence in a police state. The result is the power of the master race: the middle class über alles."

His speech was punctuated by the comments of the other: "Cool... cool... cool... hey, have another beer."

The barfly philosopher continued. "But this all seems irrelevant anyway. Philosophy has died. The concept of independence and the computer have made it untenable. An issue is not an issue without exceptions. five billion people on this earth, five billion opinions, five billion ways to prevent any conclusions from being correct."

"It's like those two brother you always read about in the newspapers, those two freaks. One guy's really good, a pacifist, but he surrounds himself with violence, like in the books he reads, the movies he sees, the places he goes to, and all that sort of stuff. He learns from them. He works real hard and has lots of money, but he gambles lots of it away, and gives a lot of it to his brother, who's like this real bad guy who's a crime boss or something.

"But this brother, as bad as he is or wants to be, always seems to manage to surround himself with good things, nice things: like he goes to church, gives money to charities and hospitals, his wife looks real innocent, he lives in a real nice house, he's clean, looks good, all that stuff. It's weird, it's too... ironic, too... contrast-y... or something.

"There's too much stuff that I don't understand, and it drives me crazy. That's all I know, man, that's all I know, that's all..."

The boy's voice wound down to a halt. The two of them sat still for a while, when finally the one who had been speaking looked up and noticed me watching him.

"Hey, who are you," he asked me.

I gave him a false name, and told him that I was a sanitary engineer at an abortion clinic, and that I had just been to see a rock and roll concert.

"That's cool, so did we," the first one said, smiling. The other one looked up. They introduced themselves as brothers and we chatted for a while, until finally one of them said: "Hey, you look famous. I think you look like that actor guy, that actor, the one they just voted most handsome man of the year or something."

"No, no, you're wrong," the other brother spoke up for the first time. He looks like Nebuchadnezzar."

"Oh yeah, yeah yeah yeay - Nebuchadnezzar. You're right."

I guffawed, somewhat, and made some signs of being embarrassed, or amazed, at being compared to either "the most handsome man (of the year)", not to mention an ancient Mesopotamian king. But then the second brother started to explain himself, and it was another Nebuchadnezzar that he was referring to, someone he know personally.

"This guy Neb, you see, is a roadie. He loads stuff like sound equipment off and onto trucks. He's very helpful, but there are times when he disappears completely. I think that he might have some pretty serious drug addiction or something."

Suddenly he stood up and said, "There are heroes in the seaweed, there are violins in the morning. All of the songs that were written can't be played on the violin. Only on the flügelhorn. I love those dear martyrs who understand what the flesh of mortals can do. If you ever read the books of lost forgiveness, I'd ask you to translate mercy for me, it is the lost chord of aggression; it is not that I want you to eat your words, but I wish you'd understand my past!!

This brother now struck me as someone who suffered from manic depression, or a sort of mental epilepsy. Every now and then his face would screw up with emotion and he would stop the story he was telling, stand up and shout out some slogans, epithets, epigrams, twisted maxims, and then sit down and continue his story. It was to became at once very disturbing, distracting, and also entertaining.

"Nobody knows very much about him, except for this one friend that he likes to hang out with, and this friend always tells me stuff about Neb, because he thinks that Neb is great. Every time that I see him, he's always talking about Neb. I think that I've talked to him more about Neb than I've ever talked to Neb. This isn't too hard to believe, since Neb doesn't talk very much, but it sure is kinda... ironic."

Then, "Unused condoms burn in garbage compactors, their love is not real. We have seen what is often wrapped in plastic and how valid it is...

"He's originally from somewhere south of here. His parents are former European refugees from forgotten European countries. He went to high school in Austria once. I met one of his friends from there. He's from Peru, but grew up in Uruguay, Brazil, and Sweden. Cool guy, he claims to have access to ancient Inca scientific knowledge in his collective subconsciousness, selfishly applying it to seduce women, instead of using it to become a great author. He had apparently slept with every female student and staff member at that school, but I don't believe it. I never saw him pick up a groupie. Not even once. He liked to smoke a strange kind of red hashish, but shunned cocaine. Instead, he carried a small pouch of coca leaves that he would chew on regularly.

"Use the words you choose as your halo, don't hide the despondency that is generated in your bed to claim grievances in the court of love.

"Neb also told us about a time that he went to Moscow where all he did was drink vodka. He survived for two weeks on bread and butter and vodka. He ended up getting scurvy. He was jailed briefly for vomiting on the feet of two Russian officers on a night train from Moscow to

Leningrad. He almost died too, trying to escape from a window on the moving train. He claims also that his greatest regret is never having gone to the Hermitage Museum during his time in Leningrad, or having spent too much of his time there blind drunk. Since then he has learned that the Hermitage stores the great metaphysical drawings of Pierre Beaugoville, who postulated that humankind was created out of the scum that formed on the bottom of a shower basin when God took a shower, a theory recently expanded upon by the rock group GWAR.

"But the master has asked what you have learned from your lesson and more than once you have offered him a blank piece of paper. At the sound of a horn, angels see that your game is not necessary to make the world run smoothly.

"Neb's the philosopher king. He only went to university for a month or two, and dropped out for never going to class. He never went because he drank every night and slept every day until four or five. After waking up, he'd go somewhere and start drinking, and at some point stumble into the library. He'd fall asleep and wake up and fall asleep and wake up. He'd take the books off of the shelves and read from them, then fall asleep, then wake up and read on. It is believed that he spent more than one night there, just reading and sleeping, keeping away from the hungry killer guard dogs the little old lady librarians train and keep in the secret caves under the basement to patrol the stacks after the doors have been locked and the lights have been turned off. He studied a lot, but he never completed enough work to pass a course. It is the typical education. After he got kicked out of school his lifestyle continued in this way too.

"Blood soaks into the rags that you have left unused after your assault on love; can there really be a truth that is understood by more than one person? The blameless do not breathe anymore. I weep for the strange passions that have caused the earth's crust to be rent wide, the throat of lava is clearing itself and knows where to spit.

"He lived at home for some time when he was younger apparently. His parents couldn't handle his lifestyle, and kicked him out. He then started to hitch-hike, to wander, to go all over the place. Apparently, he's been all over the world, witnessed several coups, learned some languages like German, French, and Chinese. He taught English in Taiwan, wrote for a newspaper in the Philippines, worked at a resort in Thailand, translated for a professor of political science in a Korean university. He's been around.

"Contradictions are the essence of what was taught me, can the truth cause anything but confusion, unless it's all actually not real? All journeys end with a definite stopping motion - momentum and inertia become old ideas.

"I heard that he has also stolen cars in France, driven them over the Sahara - over Morocco and that - and sold them for twice their value in Niger and in the lost country of Hegemonia. He also ran guns up and down the coast of Africa. Actually, I don't believe that part, but he says that he's done it. Or at least that is what his friend says he's done.

"I have watched thieves and junkies practice their art, and they remind me of my past lovers; I am waiting for an angel to show me sunsets and steamed rice. Where are compatible souls for the poor rock that is being chipped away painfully?

"He's a poet too. I've seen a book of his poetry, and we often read from it when we're on the road. It's weird stuff about needles and drugs and body piercing, but he somehow finds a way to make it beautiful. He would be an anarchist, I think, if he wasn't so much of a nihilist. He's a weird guy, man, too weird for me to... quite... grasp...

"Liken your heroes to flesh and blood, and not forceful ideals, for information is governed by the same hegemony that prescribed the painkillers of advice. I have awoken many days, feeling

the hangover of the heart, my anesthesia comes once a lifetime.

"One night we were all sitting around a campfire somewhere in South Carolina, and Neb just lost it. He took his book of poetry and most of his clothes and threw them in the fire. That's what he did, man, and he got a lot of other people to do the same. But that wasn't the point of it, he didn't care about them, he was just going on about some woman he loved and loved and loved, someone who caught some virus and grew sicker and sicker grew smaller and smaller, and finally died in his arms, young. It was strange, strange...

"What is the ineffable, since it is sought by so many young people? What have the elderly learned from their teachers - how do they induce the trances that calm them in a language of pulses and beeps? I have previously been soothed by an indescribable aloofness that has calmed shattered nerves and made the peasants of the mind return to peaceful working conditions, carefully drafting responses to obligatory questions.

"Apparently there were five years that he just sat in his room and never came out. He just read his books and read and read and read. Apparently, since nobody really ever saw what he was doing. I think it was here that he thought that he was Mao Zedong. He was Mao Zedong in the wrong time and the wrong place. He was born out of time, born long after Mao died on the Long March and was replaced by a lookalike, or something like that. But how can someone be born out of time?

"Each word left the mill in its own beautiful container. Night fell, along with anonymity and paranoia, in rags, it was all prescribed by the physicians that care deeply for our prosperity. Guilt is prolonged by the victims who need to find explanations, self-generating processes don't find sympathetic ears outside of the Omniscient, hope comes with no strings attached.

"But born out of time is what he was, it seems. But how can someone be born out of time?

"Finding more than a pinprick is fortuitous and unexpected. Love can be found in floortiles, true understanding in a selfless smile. The patrons of sensuality don't allow the government to inspect the products that they offer those lacking inner beauty. Please find your cheques in the mail.

"When we found Neb, nobody wanted to keep him. But someone thought that he looked really sad and lost, and we took him in and cleaned him up and he looked a lot better. Sometimes all people need is someone to care about them. But as much as he liked to be with us, he still needed to go off and do something else, to go somewhere else and do other stuff, nobody knew what it was. It made some of us mad sometimes, but there was nothing we could do. And we didn't want to get rid of him.

"I listen to operas that have been written specifically for my newspaper critique. Many young poets are insane, as are some older politicians. The earth around your cottage has been gathered in a pile in your absence, and presented to you for your satisfaction. Frames are built around large blobs of furniture to create houses. The local inhabitants of the town that you are traveling through have voluntarily swallowed large doses of strange medicines, including bigotry and intolerance. The compassionate have been put on the endangered species list, and will soon be extinct and no longer able to save themselves. I have seen the best minds of my generation drowned by television commentary and consumer sports programming. A recent laxative showed a non-user spontaneously combusting. Awards were given to individuals for their winning smiles and nice suits while nine out of ten people prefer anonymity . Icons are created, then clasted, while the sun rises to review the changes of the last 12 hours on another scarred terrain. The hands of time never shake, for they have been at odds eternally, and the wonder of

America is defined in long-winded sentence after sentence. But I run out of breath. I think I'm getting drunk. Whatever."

He made a motion, and didn't resume until another round of beers was brought to the table.

"Neb seemed to have a pretty good resume. He had once been the frontman in a rock 'n' roll band, and he seemed to know what he was doing. We found one of his albums once, it was okay - kinda loud, kinda crunchy-sounding like. Most of the songs were pretty abstract, about being some kind of sexual hostage, it had a lot of government conspiracy stuff in it about the government wanting to castrate him, to lobotomize him, to kill him dead!

"We have searched for truth and it is as elusive as a perfect snowflake. Roses are budding and growing from my temples, their pollen is my only sustenance. I have dreamt of a place where the sun doesn't go down, but I fear that it is on the moon. Flowers grow on all of the planets, or they will until they are explored by Terrans.

"I think that deep down inside Neb was, from what I could see, a person who in essence hated everything, even himself. Even the things that he liked and wanted to like, he found himself hating. And perhaps the closer something was to him, the more he hated it. Maybe that's why he didn't talk much, because he didn't want to reveal too much about the demons that painted everything he saw in shades of... ire. I guess I can tell that sort of thing, because I'm sometimes like that myself. But I'm different, because once I get started, I cant stop, I can't stop, I can't...

"A professional academic is compiling his History of Alienation on a large computer program, which is offering him suggestions on proper syntax. Many people love more than they should: what do they love? Dr. Buddha has prescribed an antidote, as have some other famous physicians, I don't think that their inoculations are highly regarded by the rest of the scientific community. I recently saw Sin and Death on the highway that was paved for them. They were hitch-hiking and getting lots of rides.

"Neb would still be with us if it weren't for the hate. I heard from someone who spied on him taking a shower, or cleaning himself somewhere. The guy said that Neb was completely dark from the waist down, but from the waist up he was lily-white. He looked like that Chinese symbol, the one that's white and black, you know the one... but on Neb's album cover are old pictures of him, I think they must be when he was traveling, and he's wearing shorts, and he seemed to be all one color. Photo coloration, or something else. Maybe he changed back and forth.

"It has been thought by some that there are innumerable treacheries created in the midst of human error. I am not even certain of that. But if a law is passed, the legislators of fortune have it audited by their insurers, who are chosen by a third party.

"That was the beginning of the end of Neb: the real end came recently when we were in Louisiana. A man walked into the club one time during the day when we were doing a soundcheck, announcing that he was Neb's brother. Then, before we could stop him, he ran backstage yelling his head off and disappeared suddenly. We tried to find him or Neb, but they weren't there, they were just gone. We tried to look for Neb, but we couldn't really do much about it, since we were always on the move, and we were going to Florida the next day. We figured that he decided that he needed some time on his own, or had just left as he had come, but that wasn't exactly the case.

"Youth has gone skiing on the mountain of Suicide and is dancing close to the edge with the slaves of puberty. Desire was once thought fashionable until lust was introduced, but the pretty stars have been eaten by my angels, who don't like to see me distracted. The truth has been

reported seen shining in the West and many fantastical flowers are pushing their way through new soil. Silent drops of water are collecting in the blooms and I want to collect my thoughts into just such a bouquet. Babies come into the world gloriously with secret thoughts that are given up in favor of reality and sleep. What we do with our futures cannot by definition be determined in advance, as we give up our sensibilities in favor of our passions.

"The next time we were in town, which was only five months later, somebody came up to us after the concert and said that he was writing an article for a student paper about us, and asked us some questions about Neb. He'd read about Neb in the newspaper, how they'd found him dead in the streets some time after we played town. He was listed as dead on arrival, no fixed address, cause of death was believed to have been that he choked on a small piece of plastic. This guy had seen us in concert the last time we'd played, and knew that Neb had been with us, so that's why he contacted us. We punched the shit out of him for being so callous, but thanked him anyway for letting us know at least. Shit..."

"Disbelief cannot be mined into lucidity. Paralytics have asked us to move their bodies, as have travelers. Beauty is often found in strange places. Concepts of earth are the only necessary ideas. We think we've allowed ourselves to be influenced by rich artists and dead poets..."

With that he trailed off. He took a big quaff of the new beer that he hadn't drank from yet, and then started to stare glassy- eyed at the mirror.

"Sorry about my brother," the first one said, "I think that this means that he's finished talking, or something. But it's all true: Neb came and went. Nobody knows exactly what happened to him - in fact, nobody really knew who he was in the first place. Not really anyway. It's like you: I don't really know who you are, and you don't really know who I am. Right?" he asked.

"Right," I said.

After that I finished my beer and left the bar. I had enough of human company for the evening. I wandered over to my car, got in, drove home, remembering to attach my seatbelt, the government slogan, "if you're going to drink and drive, please wear your seatbelt" permanently etched in my mind. After an hour and a half of exhaustive driving on the empty highways, suffering late night road illusions of the many sorts, I finally arrived at my home and collapsed on my bed - alone.

That night I suffered from another of my strange dreams. It approached me stealthily, coming from nowhere. As it began, I was in a house, a very large student house it seemed. I was in a room with a girl, the student from my story. I recognized her as such, since she was exactly the way that I imagined her, and I stared almost in disbelief, feeling somehow very lucky.

There was an air of implicit sexual consent between her and I. Nothing was said, it was simply in the atmosphere of the room, something in her eyes, for nothing was said. We both got up to go to another room, since the room we were in was hers and she didn't want to be interrupted by her boyfriend. We walked through the darkened house hand in hand to my room, but as we passed the bathroom, the door opened and I saw her boyfriend standing in the doorway. He said nothing as we passed, just staring knowingly, maliciously.

Once in my room, I locked the door and we lay down and embraced. Suddenly there was a knock at the door. It was my girlfriend, visiting me unexpectedly. I tried to tell her that I was alone and not feeling well... then I woke up.

Frustrated by more strange dreams, I got up, grabbed a bottle of cheap tequila, and sat in front of the television - prepared for the worst.

The next morning, deeply immersed in a hangover that painted life in shades of surreality and

despair, I phoned my girlfriend at her house. She wasn't in. I hung up without leaving a message. What had happened at the concert might not have been entirely her fault, but I did feel vaguely stood up, or at least taken for granted. Somewhere in the back of my mind I conceded the fact that there was probably some reasonable explanation for what had happened.

Several hours later I did get a call from her. She told me that after the concert she was exhausted, and frustrated in her efforts to find me, so she took a taxi to her parent's house and slept there. This was somewhat of a relief for me.

After she hung up the phone, I went to the cafe to fill up on caffeine. There, lying on the counter was a newspaper. The front page headline screamed up at me from where it lay: "Girl Dead After Concert." I read the article: it said that a 25-year-old oriental woman had been found dead the previous night in an all night variety store near to the concert hall I had been the previous night from what appeared to be natural causes. There was no name or photograph.

Once again, like so many times in the past, weeks went by uneventfully - months even. Seated at my desk, I had seen many suns rise and fall, several full moon, and even the duration of a whole season. Leaves were once again swirling, and finally, frost covered my window in it's multiply patterns, the image of future cobwebs etched temporarily into the glass like ghosts before the exorcism.

My novel was taking on new dimensions of strangeness, and I had decided to pit the teacher, my main character, and his suspected adversaries, the innocent-looking couple, in a fierce confrontation through letters to the editor in the student newspaper, a confrontation initiated by himself in an effort to try to find the author of the stories that he believed were being written about himself; the stories that he believed were written about him by the young couple. He picks through each anonymous response for clues, each phrase just ambiguous enough to keep him at bay. Each time that he writes a letter, hoping to maintain the dialogue, he waits with baited breath for the next week's issue to come out, hoping for a reply.

It was almost too easy to maintain my character's tension for chapter after chapter as he waits for responses, his lifestyle dissolving around the edges of the conspiracy that occupies all of his attention.

I could almost relate to this character that I had created, as many of the things that happened in my life were beginning to wear on me, such as the erratic behavior of my girlfriend, whom I was seeing less and less regularly, each time I saw her, her behavior was growing stranger and stranger - for example whenever we met she would tell me all about the adult movies that she had recently seen, always assuring me that she watched them alone. On top of this, my nightmares were increasing, some of them based on the strange stories that I had heard recently about my doppelgänger, my twins, lookalikes, as well as other strange dreams that I would come out of wide awake on weekends, and sluggish and sleepy on weekdays. I began to suspect that my mind was involved in a conspiracy against me.

The next strange thing that had happened to me was that someone claiming to be my brother had begun to write me threatening letters to tell me that I had to return the things that I had of his.

The final strange thing occurred in the text of the Metamorphosis: Chapter 4: inverted pyramid

Gregorska returned to his apartment finally, dragging his antennae, despairing at having lost his job and his only means for income, although his salary was over a month late, he had left unpaid. There he was, welling in the unfortunateness of his predicament.

The letter that had been given to him asked Gregorska to report to the police station, and this

seemed to him to be the only avenue left for him on this early afternoon, a time that he couldn't remember, normally being in his office at this time every day. The sun looked strange to him, the shadows alien, the shops desolate and melancholy.

It was the closest police station that he was looking for, unable to break free of his sense of duty, yet terrified of what it would bring. "Why am I going? Am I going to my end? Why am I going? Am I going to my end? Why am I going," he thought to himself after he took step after step.

He couldn't find the police station. He asked almost every person that he saw where the police station was, when they shouted at them to speak more clearly, he'd show them the letter with the commands to go to the police outpost. Each person pointed their fingers to tell him the way, giving wordless directions, each one pointing in a different direction. Gregorska became hopelessly lost. Finally, in a dark neighborhood full of eyes and peering faces, where a different language was uttered, and new dialects rose out of the slime that lined the pitch-black sidewalks, people began to spit on him, forcing him to cower, taunting him with mucus, challenging him to walk through the storm if he wanted to advance. He finally notices a large neon sign that indicated that it was the center of security and enforcement, he knew that it was the place that he needed to go to. Fleeing the spit that pelted against his hard brown carapace, he passed through the heavy doors.

Inside, a frenzied decorum reigned, a musty smell emanated from the piles of yellowing papers on the many desks that littered the many desks in the large office area. Men and women rushed by, blank expressions littering their pimpled faces, pitchers of murky drinking water atop some of the tables. Gregorska walked up to a desk and gave someone the letter. Without looking at him, the receptionist took the letter and walked away.

For the rest of that day, Gregorska stood on that spot, watching the workings of the office through his unique eyes. He saw the people come and go, congregate and retreat, swell and subside, yell and mutter, walk, run, and crawl. He felt the sensational thrill of being in a place that dealt with crime, with infringements of the law. He was eager to see a real criminal. He thought he saw one, once, as the back doors were swinging from someone who had walked through - a group of youths, four of them... with long hair, with tattoos (the mark of the criminal). Perhaps they were guilty of spray painting messages against the helmsmen of state. Perhaps they were guilty of murder.

Gregorska saw someone whom he fell in love with, another he feared, or despised, or hated, another who calmed him. Gregorska worried ceaselessly about the consequences of his being asked to come here. A puddle of mucus formed at his feet - spit that had rolled off of his hardness to collect there, or perhaps his own sweat, or perhaps other unknown secretions - from himself, from his case, or even bubbling up through the floor. He was disgusted with the place and with himself.

The shadows grew longer, and as they grew longer they grew dimmer. As he waited there, tense, he saw some of the people preparing to go home. He saw that the blank, expressionless faces had not changed all afternoon since he had been here. He wanted to go home with the people who were leaving. Making a mental note to return to this desk the next morning to keep waiting for his situation to be processed, Gregorska left the building in the trail of a woman he had watched all that afternoon, pounding a confounding number of rubber stamps onto various patches of white paper on a multitude of different, official looking forms, never leaving her work until that moment when she was going home for the day.

At that point, Gregorska made his way back to his former place of employment in the ministry, and as he went on his usual way home, the one that he had been following day after day for so many years, he could almost convince himself that nothing had changed on that day.

As he pushed the door of his apartment block open, he heard a door open next at him. Terrified, he began to skitter up the stairs, seeing out of the corner of his compound eye the form of the landlady emerge and stare wordlessly at his retreating form.

Up the six flights of stairs, Gregorska arrived at his landing hacking and breathless. Feeling under the mat with what felt like his last energy, he reached under the mat for the key, thanking the powers as he did every day that the key had not been discovered by a wily thief or an unscrupulous neighbor.

But as he put the key into the lock, there was something wrong. It wouldn't turn. For some reason, it wouldn't turn in the exact way that it had for the countless many years that he had been inserting the key into that keyhole, forcing it to move clockwise to undo the latch, to give him access to the room that he called his home, the dwelling of the abomination.

It was at that point that Gregorska noticed a note that had been attached to his door, a note that he didn't notice right away due to his lower stature. It was placed where others who had passed in that stairwell could easily read it, especially if they were coming down the stairs from above. It plainly said "Resident evicted due to governmental edict. Resident restricted from entrance due to non-payment of rent." Gregorska was stunned. A quantity of bile rose from his throat in a violent spasm, and he bent over and vomited all over his doormat. As he lay coughing on the landing, he looked to his right up the stairs to the next landing on the higher floor, where he could see a door open a crack, and beyond the crack a man - his neighbor - looking at him. The door closed with a hiss and a sharp, final click.

That was the end of the manuscript. It seemed somehow appropriate that the character, whose life seemed to be so ordered, would end in such dissolution. There was something about it that seemed like it was an incomplete manuscript. I began to speculate how Käfer might have written a better conclusion to it.

However, that was not what I found so strange about it. What particularly stirred me, was the sense of familiarity I got while reading the text, almost as if I had read it before, or that I had perhaps seen or read about some of the events that had happened in the story at that point and, increasingly, in other parts of the novel that I had read up to that point.

It was night, and I decided that I should return to my apartment. I strangely looked forward to the idea of curling down in front of my balcony window and gazing out into the nothingness, and to meditate upon it. My thoughts were beginning to hurt my mind, and my life seemed to be turning into a bad novel.

Outside, the air was still, and seemed almost stale. My car started after a few tries, I noticed that it was shaking somewhat more than I remembered it, but I didn't think much of it. After the inevitably short drive home, I walked into the lobby of my building and pressed the button that indicated which direction I wanted to go - up, naturally. I waited, in the tight lobby, in waiting mode and almost completely void of coherent thought. My brain was the blank page the writer stares at in the typewriter in front of him...

I finally looked around me. There in the comer was the old man, the security guard who never left the lobby of our apartment building. Nobody knew him, who he was or where he lived, just as nobody paid any mind to his sulky presence as they shuffled past him in the mornings, afternoons, evenings.

"I know you, I've seen you before," he muttered.

The television was on, tuned in to some local station broadcasting a game show. The strange pinch of rye whiskey seemed to drift in the air.

"I've seen your type before too," he muttered.

It made me wonder how long it would take for the elevator to arrive.

"I've been lots of places in my life, and I've been lots of things in my life: a student, a teacher, a bodyguard, a soldier, a philosopher, but this is the life I like best. I don't even have a car. On those days that are longer than they should be, they're longer for me. In this century, I'm not even human: an old man in this job, with no family, not even a car or a dog to make me responsible - to join the human tradition of owning and being owned.

"I didn't always work here either, although I've been here longer than you have, seeing people come and go. And before this job, I did the same thing for even longer at another building in a town not too far from here. Just across the border, you know."

I looked into his eyes, and felt compelled to move a little closer. The eyes were set far apart, large yellow orbs that looked dry, as if made of unpolished marble. Eyes that had seen much, but were almost dust.

"Any place you live, or work, or go to, you see the most if you stay still and let things move around. If you stop, you have the perspective to see things that are traveling, and everybody travels. People never stop. If you haven't realized that yet, you're either not old enough, or you're sleepwalking through life.

"I should tell you about this building I used to work in, the last one, the one just over the border. Over the years, I got to know all of the tenants. I got to know them by sitting in the lobby and watching them come and go. I'd look at their clothes, at what they were carrying, count how many times a day I'd see them, remember what times of the day I'd see them, what they'd say to each other, what kind of complaints they'd call me about, when they'd call me... I'm no dummy, I can see things.

"One of the women I remember was severe homophobe, a necrophiliac, an artist. She slept in the sunlit hours and wandered the apartment at night. Another guy was a neat freak, a health nut, a closet psychotic. He was a very serious businessman who has relationships with several women, none of whom he has ever met. His only way of communicating with them was over the phone and through letters, all of which occupied most of his free time. Strange - I think that he never paid his rent.

"Another woman was brutish, severe, she ate only pistachio flavored ice cream, claiming that it covered the four main food groups. She would have been a husband beater, had she been married, and had a large collection of cooking spoons and rolling pins prepared for the eventuality. That was the case, because apparently she never cooked.

"One man was an insomniac epileptic, undercover police officer who investigated various funeral parlors that were in business to make business. People often thought that he was at home when he wasn't because he had a parrot that made conversation with itself.

"Then there was the moribund bank teller, she bought her white makeup from the Avon Lady with whom she was having an affair. She had a classy wardrobe, every article in the blackest black. She dreamt of some day eloping with a fireman who would rescue her with a ladder truck... the tragedy was that she lived on the first floor.

"Another man was an anemic sumo wrestler wanna-be, a megalomaniac trapped in the body of a T.B. patient. None of his neighbors knew his name because he never introduced himself to

anyone. He stayed awake late into the night making place mats, hand puppets, and other handicrafts which he sold at local arts and crafts sales under a pseudonym. Had recurring dreams that he was running down an endless tunnel, often woke up exhausted. When this happened he took the day off from his job as a fire hydrant inspector to get some more rest. Hated dogs. Was also obsessed with the idea of personally liberating Tibet from the occupying P.L.A.

"There was another woman who was an alcoholic dietitian, she was the mistress of a prominent local politician who visited her in drag so that he wouldn't be recognized coming and going. Her neighbors thought that she was a lesbian. Collected plastic tampon applicators, and read Chaucer translated into Dutch, which she found easier to understand.

"Richard Mull, a relatively famous Hollywood actor lived there, but he was never around, so his apartment was squatted by two local winos called Oscar and Felix who were in the habit of recreating the private moments of the "I Love Lucy" show in Mull's bedroom.

"There was one man, a hyperactive narcoleptic steel drum player. He was despised by virtually all of the tenants in the apartment who frequently snuck into his apartment to drug his food with depressants. Had a dog named Splotch who also played the steel drums with his tail.

"One man, Dave Daniels, was an alcoholic and a drug addict. He spent his waking hours searching for the right high, and his sleeping hours trying to dream the right dream. His quest ended after several years when he was seduced by a famous Hollywood actress half his age, after which he became a vegetable.

"The apartment building's resident kleptomaniac was also a volunteer artist and hypochondriac corespondent interested in the newly emerged art of synergetic mail. The superintendent went into her room once a month when she was at work to collect all of the articles she had stolen, and returned them to the tenants of the building which he could do since he had memorized the contents of all of their apartments. When she was low on cash, she paid the rent with self-portraits of herself, claiming that they'd be valuable one day.

"Another man was a Spanish scholar, he translated Don Quixote from various languages back into Spanish in order for it to retain its integrity and purity. I know that in his apartment were large murals painted at orgies that he has attended - he is always pictured in these murals holding a monkey. He grew marijuana plants, but didn't smoke them since he considered all vegetation his friends.

"Then there was another man, also called Dave Daniels. He was a gay construction worker who had gone deaf working a jackhammer, since his ears were too large for ear-plugs. He had them removed since they no longer served a practical purpose. This made it easier to remove motorcycle helmets, and he seemed to get more dates after the operation.

"There was also an oriental woman, waiting endlessly for her husband to join her from mainland China, who made tofu in her apartment. She even paid for her rent in tofu. Next to her lived a man, injured in a logging accident that claimed both of his thumbs, who stayed at home all day on compensation pay, playing Ravel's "Bolero" endlessly - all day, every day. He wrote poetry that could only be understood by other people who had lost their thumbs.

"One woman, a duchess of Austrian nobility, claimed to have won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1939 for keeping Austria out of World War II. Was certified benignly insane by a doctor who was later certified criminally insane.

"One man, considered a true leader among men, spent all his time searching for the proper liberation. He said once that Margaret Thatcher could have been a great comedienne. Often dressed in a Spiderman suit and tried to scale the outside walls of the building.

"Anther tenant was an alcoholic insomniac nightclub owner, she apparently had nothing in her apartment except a bed and an answering machine. Often received erotic phone messages from the Secretary General of the United Nations. Never opened her curtains, slept in the nude, and had persistent recurring dreams that she was getting married to a man whom she couldn't recognize, but felt certain that he was a high ranking government official. Carried nude pictures of the Sputnik 3 Cosmonauts in her wallet and was convinced that she'd one day become a Buddhist monk."

The elevator still didn't come.

"We also had a nurse who grew queasy at the sight of blood. She was tormented by her job and collected marbles because of morbid fascination with eyeballs. Every time she left the building she would be followed five minutes later by a man who lived on the second floor, a philosopher who received a reasonable inheritance and spent his time contemplating man's depravity on this earth. Collected pets in order to set them free. Most of them were killed almost immediately by a commune of alley cats that were squatting in the garbage cans below his window. Had fantasies about making love to a woman who lived on the fourth floor, and imagined seducing her after entering her apartment from the balcony.

"One woman spoke with a lisping Hungarian accent, her speech was understood by nobody else in the building. She always turned the heat in her apartment up over 30 degrees so that she could wander about in the nude. Occasionally forgot to get dressed when leaving the apartment and locked herself out.

"Then there was a man who lived off of the royalties of a minor invention he patented when he was fifteen, he spent his time trying to write a novel about homosexual rice farmers in Thailand, a country he had never visited. The rice grain was his central image and symbolized both the swelling phallus and the countless individual sperm. Since he began writing the novel he's never again eaten rice, has become an alcoholic instead.

"One woman didn't speak a word of English, yet had several lovers within the building. Spent much of her spare time knitting sweaters for orphans in tropical countries. Also had a scale model of the building in her bedroom. The floors were removable and each apartment was recreated in exact detail. She was also an amateur astrologer and through clever research on the tenants' personal facts, had secretly written detailed horoscopes for each and every one of them. In this way she could determine, according to what was indicated by the alignment of the stars, anything that they were doing on any given day, where they went, how they felt, what their fortunes would be, etc.

"One man was a stamp-, butterfly-, money-, comic book-, gun- and tax collector. Spent time practicing Tai Chi and Tai Kwon Do, he spoke several oriental languages that he learned in Asia over several years working there as an English teacher. Very insecure person. Worked in a nearby community college as a teacher, did Elvis Presley impersonations in a nightclub on weekends.

"Another man, a vegetarian insomniac, worked as a meat inspector. Once worked as a dock worker, but lost is right arm in a fight. Wandered the halls mumbling about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam, and sometimes would sleepwalk to the laundry room where he'd turn all of the machines on.

"Another woman eats nothing but sushi, she's sick quite regularly. All of the members of her family have died of food poisoning. Kept fish in an aquarium, in her bathtub, and in the refrigerator. Went grocery shopping every fourth night from midnight to 1:30. Was known to

break into other apartments that she mistook for her own. A major Elvis Presley fan, she claimed to own every one of his recordings including "Elvis at Budokan."

"We had other tenants: they were the angel of despair, the spirit of nostalgia, the ghost of forgotten longings, as well as a host of incubus and succubus, the phantoms of the libido. They were unseen; they came and they went and they never paid rent, they stayed uninvited for undetermined, indefinite periods of time, but they had to be accounted for nonetheless.

"But the other tenants were all nothing. They were losers, and their humanity was eclipsed by one man who was also the only person in the whole building who would come and talk to me. He was a writer, and during extended bouts of writers block he would come to me and we'd talk, watch television together, or find some place to make love together. It was beautiful. He sometimes covered for me in the middle of the night, squeezing into my too-small uniform, while I ran naked outside the apartment complex, or through the industrial park that adjoined the property. Once, on one of these nights, he even bailed me out of jail.

"There was no difference between his voice and mine: we were the same person. He wrote books and books: of poetry, of prose, or of something he invented himself, called porphs - morphological units of poetry, poetical units of meaning. He once asked me what erudite meant. Yes, he was an overlooked talent.

"He attributed his development to his tenth grade English teacher, a man who shared his family name with that of a brand of disposable razor. A strange man with a shaved head who oozed intensity and drew him into the vertiginous world of... literature.

"This writer, Arthur Posteri was his name, did what every writer does at the beginning of his career: he read. He read immensely from the entire body of world literature, as well as study rhetoric and critical theory - particularly focusing on those theories that could be studied, but should never be applied!!! Even in the field of literature there are dangerous areas that should be avoided. Flirting with them may be unsurpassably exciting, but could also the ticket to a very short life.

"As with any writer, he felt the need to travel, which he did - all over the world, from the jungles and the rainforests of Asia and South America, to the deserts and steppes of Africa, to the hedgerows and train networks of Europe. He had particular interest in learning the languages of the former axis powers - German, Japanese, and Italian - in an effort to arrive at a linguistic understanding of the madness of the Second World War. He eventually settled in Taiwan, supported himself with a job teaching English, and gave himself over to studying Chinese, the great symbolist language.

"It was here that he discovered the work of the relatively unknown British/ American poet Thomas Stephen Eliot. He read every one of his poems, and then began to read all of the works that were alluded to in Eliot's writing, or seemed to be influential in formulating his philosophy of poetry and, to a lesser extent, play writing. Finally, he read everything he could find about the university where Eliot had studied, as well as the town where he had been born and grown up.

"Having accomplished this, Posteri began to write his own poetry as if he truly were T.S. Eliot, writing new poetry in the exact style that T.S. Eliot had used, employing all of the same rhetoric. He used his swollen vocabulary to write dense poetry that said almost nothing, that was challenging to read at the same time that it was easy to understand, while being impossible to explain.

"This went on for several years, until someone handed him a book on Zen, upon which he went temporarily insane, and he fled the Orient and began a mad oddessey across the United

States of America. It was at some point in this mad dash to personal identity that he was introduced to the writer Jack Kerouac, and Posteri embraced the mixture of drugs, Zen, and the complete destruction of all and any literary conventions, something that his previous idol had lacked the courage to do completely. As he read Kerouac, through a blurred drug vision, a hazy film covering his eyes, he began to write his own form of sincere flattery, his own works that dealt with his male friends, driving, the death of his brother, his Mexican junkie girlfriend Tristessa, finding satori in Paris, the Mexico City blues, a holiday at Big Sur, living like a subterranean, or finding the desolation angels.

"His lifestyle collapsed from under him as he noticed that his friends were all marrying, becoming grim and uninspiring, and America was turning glassy-eyed in an era of corporate programming of the population. After a brief flirtation with J.D. Salinger, his studies turned completely inward once again, but in a different way - one that favored the private negotiation with the soul, based on knowledge contemplated in isolation from the devices of the brainwashed society. He moved to the city where I was working, found an apartment in the building where I worked as a security guard, and took a quiet job in a city library. He apparently talked to nobody, yet somehow managed to begin a rumor that he had always lived in that city, an original inhabitant, trying to erase to the outside world and to himself his former identity as a traveler, an outsider, and an individual.

"Working in the library, he began his most creative period. It was an exciting time for him - I could tell. This perfect moment was almost destroyed once when he made the mistake of falling in love with a beautiful oriental woman, during which time he wrote not a word. Happily, this miscarriage of literature was solved when the woman in question disappeared completely and without a trace. After a two-week period of intense withdrawal, from which some doubted that he would recover, our writer slowly came back to his senses, and eventually resumed the road of his true destiny. Only me, in my capacity as eternal observer to the building, knew what happened to the woman, but I will never tell."

I had a feeling that the elevator would never come.

"Then he began to work on some short story - it was something that he was scrupulously rewriting, editing and revising, the most concise story possible that summed up all of his creative ideas. He eventually had to put this off, fearing again for his sanity.

"His approach to writing was frustrated by the sense that could only write about something that he was also reading about: if he knew that he wanted to write about cars, he'd have to first read a book about cars; or if he wanted to introduce an element of paranoia into a tale he was working on, he'd have to read a treatise on paranoia. Strangely enough, he also couldn't write unless he'd first purged his body and mind by urinating, passing stool, showering, and masturbating - expelling the corruptions that would prevent him from true, pure writing. And he could never write if he had eaten.

"Then suddenly he began a new approach to writing. After sleeping for three days straight, he got up and began to construct a typewriter, one with forty keys, whereby each key represented one of the most common words in the English language. Each key had a subset of five keys that were of secondary importance in the language, and each of these had yet another subset of ten words, five of which were synonyms of the master word, and the other five antonyms. The typewriter was ingeniously designed in a scientific exactness that no one could have predicted exists in the English language. Posteri used this typewriter as a device to write more directly, quicker, more literal in a whole-single unit approach to writing.

"This approach mutated into something other once he and his typewriter conceived and gave birth to a wording processor, a computer that had an advanced system that linked the word processor to a programming capacity based on a series of complex logarithms. He used it initially to write cheap pornographic stories in order to give his mind some reprieve and to test its capabilities, but eventually got bored with that and turned it over to more advanced experiments.

"The first thing that he did was to write a program that would reassign the value of each of the letter keys semantically on the keyboard: each key to one word - exactly the same as with his typewriter, just as a pianist would assign one sound to one key. In Posteri's world, one sound equaled one unit which was correspondingly one word.

"He simplified this further by abandoning his keyboard to the element of chance, or perhaps of providence, fate, destiny. He wrote a program that would use only the 26 letter keys, and would randomly assign each key an ever-changing variety of words, with a random assignment of sentence lengths. A grammar program, working simultaneously with the other program, would rearrange the words randomly assigned and ensure that they fit prescribed laws of grammar and meaning. Theoretically then, he could press a single key twenty times, and produce some combination of five, six and nine word sentences (or a twelve- and eight word sentence, or a five and fifteen, etc.). In practice, he would sit at the computer and type stories, or letters to his family members, or even just the sentence "the quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dogs" repeatedly to fulfill the prescribed number of key taps in order to write his random, underlying superstory.

"At this point he briefly fantasized about the possibility of literarily projecting himself back to 1947 so that he could write George Orwell's Nineteen Seventy-four before Orwell himself could; but these vague dreams soon gave way to more exciting prospects, such as the idea of manipulating existing text. He added to his existing programs one that would replace one randomly picked letter with another randomly picked letter - for example, every B with a C - in every word that had a morpheme that would accept that change, for example changing "bad" to "cad." This program worked on momentum, so that the faster Posteri typed, the faster the program would evolve the piece, or rather transmogrify it into something more and more powerful.

"What he finally ended up with was a 100,000 page text. The text had been generated in about three or four days, almost automatically. He then launched himself into the awesome task of editing this vast body of work down to something wieldy or manageable. He did all the work manually, and it took him over five years. Can you imagine: working every night after work and every day off for five years on the same project? Nevertheless, he managed to cut this work down to 20,000 pages, and he then gave it to me to proofread.

"I did this gladly, and I read it fast too, considering that I had a lot of free time in my job. I started off reading slow - like 75 words per minute, and by the time I finished, I was reading 750 words per minute - fast!! It was written magically in such a way that as soon as I finished reading it I realized that I had forgotten everything that I had just read. I had no recall of any of the stories, but I was left with a great feeling of satisfaction, so I began to read it again. The second time I read it, I remembered everything and I was chilled through and through with an unbearable weight of dread. It was terrible. It was his masterpiece, and I never read another one of his works of my own free will.

"He finally picked up the initial short story that he had begun writing earlier, and he quickly

finished it. It was called 'Jorge Luis Borges, Author of Don Quixote'. That piece contains this strange, but beautiful passage (which I think I know by heart):

[...history, the mother of truth, which is the rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future.]

Written in the seventeenth century, written by the "ingenious layman" Cervantes, this enumeration is a mere rhetorical eulogy of history. Borges, on the other hand writes:

[...truth, whose mother is history, who is the rival of time, depository of deeds, witness of the past, example and lesson to the present, and warning to the future.] That was followed by a rebellious phase where he wrote any number of short stories about any number of fantastic things... like men who woke up to find themselves transformed into moths; people engaged in the practice of biomail; or an ancient civilization that designed a system of clairvoyant memories through the disassembling of the creative unconsciousness that was supposed to aid humankind in the process of psychic evolution, but has actually prove to be the bane of its existence.

"His final work was a piece that incorporated every literary device he'd ever known in a literalist symbolist story about a man who offered the evidence he needed to negate the existence of his own character through the phenomenon of doppelgänger assassination. At this point, he had reached epiphany - he truly was Jorge Luis Borges; so he took an old pen that was in his desk drawer, one that had run out of ink at some point, and drove it swiftly deep into his heart. He fell over his desk and his blood soaked through his entire manuscript, rendering it illegible almost completely. He was found days later, and buried in some unknown location. I eventually transcribed his manuscript from that blood-soaked paper, the red having turned brown on those previously virgin sheets of white paper, stumbling over a handful of words that were too difficult to make out, when even the context of the story offered several possibilities.

"The reason I'm telling you this story, son, is because of what you need to know. It is true, that he had your eyes. He had your hands. You talk the same, eat the same, wear the same clothes, smile the same, kill the same, walk the same; you read the same books, you receive the same letters, you think the same, you even write the same. He had everything that you have, but as much alike as I was to him as well, I have nothing in common with you! You revile me," he barked, "You!! Get away!!" I recoiled, a bell rang, the elevator doors opened, and I quickly backed into them and was gone.

That night I had another one of my strange dreams. They seemed to be occurring more and more frequently, as I imagine always happens in times of greatest creativity, or in times of great personal significance: of frustration, paranoia, fear, anger, or any of the emotions that are linked to the imagination...

In this dream I became aware of myself to see that I had been attached to a chair with generous ammounts of surgical tape. Above me stood smirking a gigantic muscular man with short black hair, covered head to toe with splotchy black tattoos. He was grinning as he told me that I was going to have to die for my crimes; the crimes that I had committed against humanity by being incorrect in thought and action; by being the organ of the parasites, my body being the vehicle that conveyed emotional pestilence to the ignorant masses, my hand holding the poison

pen that scripted articles under the name Roch Polis, a stack of which he pulled out of an open drawer in a clenched fist, and threw at me - the sheets attacked my body like a flock of seagulls, stinging me with papercuts and finally falling to the earth from whence they had come.

In his hand he held a spoon, a lighter, and a small black ball that he explained to me was essence of India ink. He placed the ball in the spoon and added a small amount of water. He heated the mixture with the lighter, and then drew it all slowly into a syringe.

He told me that he had the power of life and death in his hands, but that my crimes were so extraordinary that he would not hesitate to execute me by fatal injection, but it was up to him how long he would wait before he would inject it into my forearm, and it depended entirely upon how hard I would beg for an extension, and how patient he was. I tried to speak, to defend myself, but I could say nothing, my tongue thick in my mouth - thick, fat, dry, and stiff. I was frozen in the chair, a chair that I felt would be holding me for an eternity, and that I had never known anything else...

It was weeks later, but the memory of that dream, as well as others was still stirring around the forefront of my curiosity. I thought and thought and thought about what they might mean, but I was far away from any answers. Dreams always seemed to happen to me either during times of great creativity or great change.

Nevertheless, I was sitting in my office in the same muted frustration as I had been on many previous afternoons. I was trying to write my novel, but I was really thinking about any number of things. I had just resolved to go for a walk by myself down "Inspiration Street", the street that cleared my imagination and helped me sort out my text, or gave me fresh ideas as I'd walk through the brisk air, when there was... a knock at the door.

"Hello, comrade." It was my colleague, poking his head through the door. Dressed head to toe in green, he certainly was a sight to see.

"Ah, yes, greetings to you too. I'm just on my way out for a walk, sorry. What did you need? Can it wait, or will it just take a second. What is it?" I asked, stutteringly.

"Nothing, really, I'm just bringing you this stuff. Sorry about the tardiness. I've been meaning to bring it over, but I've been too busy recently in the pursuit of... well, the pursuit of pursuing. I'm sure it will be just as much a surprise to you as it will be to me. Anyway, here you go. Good luck, and have fun with it." He handed me an envelope thick with material, and he was gone.

I opened the slit of the envelope slightly - awkwardly since the envelope was quite heavy - reached in with my left hand, and pulled out a thick sheaf of paper. On the top of the pile was a small post-it note that said:

The Metamorphosis: Chapters 5

I melted back into my chair, having completely lost my desire to go for a walk. That was the moment the narrative died in my mind. I stared in disbelief at the manuscript on my desk, a manuscript I was in the midst of proving didn't exist. But there it was, in black and white, right in front of me, printed on the same leathery paper.

Blindly, my fingers thick with numbness, I fumbled with the paper and spread it wide to the first printed page in the volume, and read the words: Chapter 5: The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy cockroach

Gregorska, without any of his belongings, and without a job or self-identity, was lost.

He sat down on the landing trying to decide what to do. How could he break down the door. Could he break down a door? He lacked the courage, surely, to make so much noise, to disturb his neighbors that much...

Gregorska slouched, he drooped. After moments of staring into the murky gloom of the stairwell, he heard someone several flights up open their door, close it, and begin to walk down the stairs. With a start, he jumped up and began to walk down the stairs, backwards, watching his way as he passed, scanning for the person who was following him.

At the bottom of the stairs he saw the landlady's door, and began knocking, pounding with four of his six legs. There was no answer. The landlady wasn't in. But hadn't he just seen her? What would he do, what would he do, what would he do? All he wanted to do was sleep.

The other person that was coming down the stairs was almost there, Gregorska abandoned his search for the landlady, pulled the door wide, and scuttled out.

Once on the street, Gregorska didn't know which way to go. He navigated his way through the alleys and onto the main street. Could he take a streetcar somewhere? Could he check into a hotel? Would any hotel accept him? Where should he go? It was already dark, and he didn't know what to do when he didn't even have his hovel to go back to. For all his life, he didn't know what to do.

For the next 6 hours, Gregorska began to walk. He walked through neighborhoods that he had never seen, past tenements he didn't know existed. He walked more than he ever did - initially along the bus routes that he had taken during his former normal life, and then when he had exhausted those patterns, he began to go down roads that he didn't trust, that looked new and dangerous to him. Everything looked different from his perspective, even the bus routes that he thought he knew intimately. Landmarks that he looked for were no longer there, and commanding structures he had never seen before appeared in the places he remembered differently. All had changed, almost as much as Gregorska himself had. It had changed, and that was all, but the change was hard to notice. But since it was to hard to notice, it probably wasn't real change anyway. It was just like the shades that he thought were like himself that he once thought he saw, he thought he saw them on the bus.

He wandered and wandered. He wandered through the park where he saw lovers, couples blend into one another and become themselves, and in a narrow alley he saw one brother kill another. Down another avenue, he saw men with needles stab themselves in the arm, and then collapse in a heap. In another, smaller park, he saw soldiers attack each other in a struggle until force convinced the majority which one had to be reduced to a pulp.

It was finally in an alley that Gregorska settled down to rest; exhausted, he collapsed in the grime amidst a pile of garbage cans, away from any light, under a pile of rusting metal parts, where he found for himself some food, and finally - sleep.

Samuel Gregorska awoke from troubled dreams to find himself in an alley, the sun already up, with a note in his hand.

Funny, he thought, I don't remember finding a note anywhere last night. What is it, what does it say?

It was very difficult to read what it said. It seemed to be instructions for him to go somewhere that night after midnight. Who had written it? Who knew that he was there?

I paused from my reading. A note. What can that mean. A note to meet later, that's one of the oldest set-ups in the book. Will he fall for it?

Just then Gregorska began to wonder what time it was. He had to be at the police station that day...

Growing somewhat impatient with Gregorska and his police station, I became over-eager, so I skipped to the end of the passage, to find out what the meeting would bring him.

The last line of the manuscript said:

Gregorska got on the tram. It was 11:00 at night, the last one. He had to go now to his destination, the one the lost note had told him about.

Another set-up. My colleague had delivered an incomplete manuscript to me. I began to suspect his intentions. And he still hadn't told me where he had found the manuscript. And I still hadn't asked him.

It was a week later that I finally found myself seated at a table in the graduate student lounge, across from my lover, having a glass of beer. She was explaining to me something that she was working on, something that she had noticed in her surroundings, her generation, her household. She was telling me that "...married couples - you know them, lots of our friends have gotten married - how they're all full of life before they get married, and how they love each other and all that, and after they're married you sense that no matter how much they still love each other, they suddenly become grim, morose, their laughter is empty. They look at you through these hollow eyes, smile thinly, as if they have some knowledge that they won't let you in on, that you must experience yourself in order to be initiated in one of these secret life initiations that happens after marriage.

"I can see it now, a couple that I'll be talking to will listen to my chatter listlessly, but who perk up immediately when the discussion turns to my consideration of a marriage offer. They will urge me on with a false urgency, an over-eagerness, somewhat like the anticipation of a stage villain waiting for the unknowing victim to take the first long draught from a poisoned chalice. These people want to see me married so that they can have me as a part of their coven, misery loving company, the damned wanting someone to share their solitude. Share solitude. Isn't that an oxymoron? Or just an enigma. Nevertheless, I don't trust them. I don't think that they want the best for me.

"But you know what's strange... I don't know how this is related, but I feel that somehow it is. The other night I had this dream where we're in this car and we're in a parking garage. We want to leave, but it's an underground lot and we can't find the exit. We can't even find the ramps that go up, so we eventually drive onto a ramp that takes us down, and it just keeps going down - down, down, down. It just keeps going, it's driving me crazy, but it keeps going, and there are no cars on the levels that we pass going down, it's just us, and for hours and hours we're driving, and I have no idea how deep we are, or when anything's ever going to change, or if we're getting any closer to an exit. It's just too weird, too weird, I don't understand it, and I hate that, just as much as I hate thoughts about marriage and the death of the soul..."

There was a long pause, during which I mulled over the confusion of what she was revealing to me. I didn't sound new, in fact it was based on principles that have never gone away. It revolted me that she was sharing her disease with me, and I told her so. Then she said:

"There's something that I've been meaning to tell you for a long time; and especially now that you've shaved off that long beard - you remind me strangely of someone I knew in first year at university, in my undergrad years..." Then she began a long story that shocked and disturbed me, for although I could never say that I really knew her well at all, this pointed demonstrated for me how little of her I really did know.

"Actually, this was in my first year when I was an aspiring psychology major, long before all of the changes that have brought me to where I am now. I was also quite a different person then than I am now. For example, I had none of the scars on my face that I have now, nor the scars on my arms. I didn't smoke or drink or read. The single pursuit that I had in mind was purely

sexual, to lose my well-guarded virginity in a moment of apathy, and for that I had many many opportunities. However, over the year, as much as I experienced, I still found myself wanting more.

"So one day in February I was introduced by a friend of a friend of a friend to a guy who was just finishing his thesis work in grad school. He was very disillusioned in almost everything: in love, in society, in scholarly pursuits... in language, in literature, in psychology... and in human morality. He had the requisite existential angst and wallowed in his own insecurity and nostalgia for the perfect female ideal that he saw within himself which he called the anima, or Annie Mah (while leafing through his stuff, I came across pictures and poems of her that he had made). He seemed to have some philosophical ideal of an ideal existence such as the one he had experienced in high school, since he went to a boarding school in Europe, the ideal cosmopolitan environment, the amalgam of a thousand cultures, languages, and habitats. As a result of his despair, he gave himself over to a life of debauchery and opened himself to every experience imaginable, which stopped at almost nothing. He knew that his experimentations were making himself miserable, but I think he had a kind of fascination in discovering how far he could go before he would bottom out. He put the bullet in the chamber, and was playing the numbers game of sexual roulette, knowing that he'd either come to a resolution in the death of his opponent, or catch the virus that would be the end of him.

"In the sense of experimentation, we were almost similar, and I think that it was that which drew us together. I think that he found a fascination in my clear, young skin, and he would bunch it up in his hand and make a fist. I in turn would attack him and make feverish love to him, and pound his arms and back just as he was about to reach orgasm. We were parasitical towards each other, and it was just as I could feel his will budge in favor of mine that I cast him off, sending him back to the abyss that he seemed to have forgotten about, the annihilation that he had been seeking so feverishly before he met me.

"I knew that what I was doing to Manfred was for his own good, and after that I lost contact with him, but I had a network of spies in my employ that I sent out to watch him. Actually, it was less planned than coincidental that a few of my friends worked in the same mega-corporation as him the following summer and were able to survey him in his developments. I had also, during our brief interlude together, managed to befriend his mad sister, who gave me other updates that my friends in the company didn't have direct access to.

"The downward spiral continued for several months, but ended one day finally - abruptly and unexpectedly: Manfred had fallen in love. One day at the company he met a woman - an exchange student from Asia, who turned his head, gave him hope, and made him want to live. His character lost the quality of an individual making his appearance on the haphazard stage, but had the air of completeness, of the person who has the confidence to deal with the world and its multidimensional tangibilities.

"He and his lover - he called her Mi-shee, and she called him Mi-hee - stole away from work one afternoon and didn't return for a week. They went up to a cottage in the northlands without food, planning to spend the full time exploring every facet of the other's aspect. What went on there is difficult to imagine for someone who has, shall we say, a conventional approach to romance and relationships. They would stare deep into each others' eyes, and as one would breathe out, the other would breath in; and they would exchange the other's animation, slowly, slowly chipping out the interior and letting it flow and be shared, and to receive in return what was needed, and finally a complete exchange had occurred. She began to shed her long hair,

leaving behind a short shock that was growing in; he in turn grew his hair extremely long all around in a short passing of time. They became each other and melded into the other, so that after the transformation, it wasn't certain who was who they were at the beginning of the occurrence.

"What I consider happened between them was the union of Plato's hermaphrodite, the two parts of the soul - one female, the other male - that are separated in heaven, and it is the lifelong object for each half to find the other. This is what happened to Mi-hee and Mi-shee, as well as a good deal many other things. In their case, it was also the twain of East and West meeting in one place.

"I saw their happiness and considered sabotaging it somehow - a completeness such as theirs was unnatural and needed to be destroyed. I began to plan something, feeling guilty the whole while for being such an incorrigible soul, such a stock Shakespearean character. What happened in the end was that I didn't need to sabotage them, the folds of destiny pinched together and drew apart leaving them in a void produced with a loud snapping sound.

"A letter came from Asia commanding Mi-shee to return to her home - that her mother was ill and the family needed them there at the home until the mother got better, and then Mi-shee would be able to return here to her job. They both knew that it was a ruse. that the family had somehow heard of the interracial romance that had developed between them and were engineering a separation, a ploy to force the wayward dove back to her brood.

"The couple, maddened by the impending separation, somehow knew of the finality of the act, and of the deception that was going to keep them apart permanently. This troubled them, but they were paralyzed in knowing that there was nothing that they could do. Neither of them was strong enough to challenge the forces of fate that they could feel tugging at their legs, grabbing their heels and forcing their lives into prescribed patterns.

"He drove her to the airport, and when she finally boarded the airplane, it was unsure exactly which one of the two was going to be flying to Asia on that day, and which one would be staying here. They finished a long good-bye that had been going on for two or three days, and finally when the end came, they knew that they were not just saying good-bye to each other, but to themselves. As the flight left, and the tension of the psychic bond stretched and increased and pulled and finally gave away, it was he driving home who allowed his car to collide with the highway partition and combust at high speed, while in the airplane her voice rose and rose in a high pitched scream where she sat in the plane until all the oxygen left her body at a high altitude and she was engulfed in the racking disruption of a seizure that left her void.

"But I keep thinking how that young man, had he lived, would have been you. The moment of greatest familiarity between you and him comes deep in the middle of the night, right when we are in the midst of making love, sweat and groans bouncing off of the naked walls, and there you are, below me, and I want to pound every inch of life right out of you. That's just how I feel."

Suddenly, both of us looked up, and there was my colleague standing by our table. How long had he been there?

"Hello," he said to her first. "Hello," she replied.

Then he looked at me and said, "Do you mind if I sit with you." He was carrying a beer that was flowing over the frosty lips of the glass, splashing creamy foam onto the floor. She motioned with her hand, inviting him to have a seat.

"Sorry, I'm not interrupting anything, am I?" he asked me.

"No," I replied, "confession time is over," keeping my hands under the table so that he

couldn't see them shaking. Splitting open, my world, and my vision was beginning to crack. I wonder if either of them would see me reach into my coat pocket. Would either of them notice me reach into my jacket and take something out, would they hear the rattling of the pills in the jar?

"Just wanted to see what you think of the new manuscript. Quite startling, isn't it? It certainly doesn't pull any punches, does he? Right there in the first paragraph, a man turning into a moth."

"What are you talking about," I said rudely. "That's the first manuscript. And he doesn't turn into a moth, he becomes a cockroach!"

"That's funny, I thought it was a moth. I don't usually forget things like that - there's a big difference between a moth and a cockroach. How could I forget a thing like that? It's called the metamorphosis, isn't it? A cockroach doesn't go through as dramatic a metamorphosis as a moth anyway. Unless the metamorphosis referred to is the one from man to insect. Strange, why would I confuse something like that."

"That's okay, you've been under a lot of stress lately," I countered, "and you're occupied with other things besides this problem manuscript. What? Don't you think? Oh... Oh... sorry, I think I need to go to the bathroom."

Having said that, I slipped away from the table, but instead of going to the washrooms, I left the cafe and went back to my office, a one-minute walk through the academic maze. Many of my colleagues were in their offices, again - their doors half open, they were staring at me.

Fumbling with the keys, I opened my door, one step to my desk, and I found the manuscripts, opened to page one, and this is what I saw:

Chapter 1: Ungeziefer Descending a Staircase

Samuel Gregorska woke from uneasy dreams to find that he had been transformed into a gigantic Ungeziefer.

"Ungeziefer" I thought, "a vermin, a beast - neither cockroach nor moth nor man."

I ran back to the bar and walked back to the table. I sat down and the apparitions of my companions shimmered for a moment and disappeared. I was alone.

I got up and ran away from the table, heading in one way, then another, trying to find the washroom. The vomit was rising from my stomach, and burbling out of my mouth in quick spasms, I finally got through the door, vomiting on the floor as I ran. I slipped on the vomit, and in one invisible motion I was face-down on the floor, skidding along towards the stalls. The vomit covered my tongue, and I gasped - panted for air, and swallowed the contents of my mouth, which made me vomit again. I felt like I was dying, like the jerking that my stomach was subjecting me to was going to propel it out of my mouth, trailing behind it my intestines, it would turn me inside out. I had no desire to see my stomach, and it revolted me so much, that I had to vomit again. Somehow, I managed to get my small vial of pills out of my jacket pocket, and swallowed two or three.

Slowly, I dragged myself to my feet, and pulled myself over to the mirror, and turned on the water. I felt hideous. I put my whole head under the tap, and rinsed my head, paying attention to my eyes and ears.

The water still running, I left the bathroom, running down the halls, I was now desperate just to get back to my office. I arrived at the office, tried my keys - they didn't work. I was sweating, jingling the keys, swearing, I could hear doors up and down the hall closing. Then I realized that I was at the wrong door, that my keys wouldn't work for someone else's office. In a daze, I arrived at my office and saw that the door was open a crack. I stumbled through the door, and

collapsed on the floor.

I awoke many hours later; it was dark outside, and the ebony sheath in front of my window belied neither streetlight nor moonlight. I pulled my head together forcibly, collecting my marbles where they lay on the floor, the pieces barely fitting together. I left the office, nearly slipping on something on the floor. The door was open as I left, but I pulled it shut behind me - click!- and walked away. I went out onto the street, and found a taxi to take me home. I was much too sick to drive myself.

After a short drive, I was at home. I dragged myself upstairs, managing through waves of nausea to get myself undressed. I collapsed on the bed and fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

I awoke some time after that, feeling amazingly refreshed but very very stiff. I went downstairs, and there were fifteen messages on my answering machine. Each one of them was a different person wondering why I had broken my appointments, why I hadn't shown up for the classes I taught, and missed all of my meetings. The meetings mentioned were all supposed to happen later in the week.

This thoroughly confused me and, resisting the temptation to go back to bed where I had just been so comfortable, I decided to arrange my affairs. I opened the door to get some fresh air and noticed the morning newspaper had arrived. I didn't understand why I had received the newspaper, I thought that I only paid for the Thursday edition.

I picked it up, and saw that it was indeed the Thursday edition. I checked the date and this drew me to the unavoidable conclusion that I had slept for three days. Impossible!

As I stood there incredulously, with newspaper in hand, after a few moments my eye drifted down to the headlines: one of the smaller ones on the front page said: Coup in Hegemonia.

"What!!" I cried out loud... the nausea was unbearable. Coup in Hegemonia

-by Pierre Polis

Last night at midnight, Liberata rebels entered the Hegemonian capital of Heideggeropolis after months of intense fighting in the city outskirts.

The rebels immediately took over the nation's radio and television stations and began to broadcast their ten points of the people.

The President of Hegemonia and his cabinet were trying to flee the rebels, but they were intercepted at the airport when baggage clerks led the rebels to the fleeing 747 jet on the runway.

The group of politicians were all immediately executed on the tarmac and their pictures of their dead, bloodied bodies were published in the national newspapers.

Among the dead are President Klaus Nesferatu, Finance Minister Helmut Rennschwein, Foreign Minister Derek Dialectic, and Minister of Information Alfred E. Priori.

So another one of my lookalikes was dead. Was this the last one? How many were left? I had to go tell someone.

I drove to school, faster than usual, my vehicle shaking more and more the closer I got to the school. I looked up when I was stopped at a traffic light, and I saw a large mass of black birds circling somewhere over my car, leaves were flying all over the place, ripped out of the trees by the strong wind that had arisen over the hills of our small city. I raced to out-distance the birds, the leaves, the wind.

The first place I went to was my office. I opened the door a crack and was assaulted by musty air and an incredible rotting smell. The air was thick with congestion, and the unbearable assault of that odor that crawled deep into my skull without there being any way to prevent it. It was almost as if it were a pestilence waiting for me, to take advantage of my warm metabolism to

breed many happy generations before the biochemical mutual apocalypse my death would bring.

What I found on my desk was a curious thing - it was a post-it note from my colleague "Sorry chap, had to take the manuscript back. Can't explain, need it for something else." Another needless infuriation. I crumpled up the note and threw it into the wastepaper basket. How could I get it back, I wondered, I pondered, the schemes built up in my mind: they included finding him, beating him to death, and going through all of his belongings until I found the papers and then going to South America to live the life of an intellectual fugitive; breaking down the door of his office and taking every one of his files, then driving with them up to a rented cottage to process for clues; finding his family (if he had any) and holding them hostage until the manuscript could be recovered; disguising myself ingeniously as a beautiful woman to seduce the secret out of him... or any number of possible yet ridiculous scenarios. On the way out of my office, I looked down and saw a small piece of stiff rubber or plastic. I stooped down and looked carefully at it: it was a small, dried, rumpled up latex condom. Repulsed again, on such a morning of repulsions, I took a piece of cardboard and scooped it up and put it into the wastepaper basket.

The first thing that I thought I would do would be to go to his office to see if he was in and demand to know what had happened to the manuscript, especially since I hadn't had an opportunity to read from any of the second manuscript that he had just brought me. I could even be sly about it - approach him as a bearer of curious trivia, to ask him if he had heard about "the strange fate of" A. Priori yet. I made my way through the maze, feeling my way through the parts that were poorly lit, looking for the string on the floor, the trail of bread crumbs... After getting lost several times, I found the office. I was amazed to find, stretched across the doorframe was a large piece of pressboard, accented by a yellow police tape that straddled it like the ribbon on a Christmas present. This development made me nervous, and I decided that the best way to get some solid answers was to approach the departmental secretary, who knew both my colleague and myself.

I walked into the office. The secretary wasn't in, so I sat down to wait.

Finally, she returned; but she didn't notice me right away. A moment after she walked in, she finally noticed me. She looked at me as if I were some sort of strange oddity, a perverse ancient sexual curio unearthed at an archeological dig. I could tell that she was alarmed to see me, and I could see also see a kind of plain nervousness creep into her face, as if there was something she knew about me that she didn't want to let on.

"Hello," she said, "how are you? Did you get our messages? We've been trying to get in touch with you for a few days now? Where were you? Did you get your messages?"

"Yes, well, I was ill. But that's not what I came to see you about. I'm just wondering what's happened in my colleague's office..."

I looked at her, and her face began to melt. Her eyebrows came together and her eyebrows drooped - her eyes dissolved and the puddles spilled out over her prominent cheekbones and ran down his face.

"Oh my God, do you have to bring it up? I know that you detested him, but you don't have to be so deliberately cruel, do you? There hasn't been quiet around here since the police took his body away. Haven't you heard?!? And besides that, the police have been looking for you."

I was baffled, amazed, astounded - it was preposterous, monstrous. I ran back to where his office was, and I ripped past the pressboard enclosure, through the police tape, and it all collapsed inward with a bang. I then saw that the door had been ripped off of its hinges, that the

once heavily laden bookshelves were bare. The sword and preserved beetle that had once been on his wall were no longer there either. I walked into the office, and picked up the bulky sheet of pressboard where it lay flat on the ground to try to put it away. As I lifted it up, I could see that underneath it on the ground was the chalk outline of a body, punctuated by a very large rust-colored bloodstain that had sunk, deeply etched, into the short burgundy carpeting. I let out a long, high-pitched scream, my vision dissolving from the outside inwards in a decreasing swirl of red and beige and white and thin shards of black hair until it fell inward, in a point, upon which my whole world became completely black.

For the next many many months I dreamed, floating through an amorphous morphine world of visions, visions that captured the moment but I could not remember or place in context after they had passed. Places that I had been to or had never been to, there with people I knew from elsewhere being impossibly juxtaposed onto alien landscapes; being chased through labyrinths for my crimes, a vague guiltiness of being alive, accused of contemplating existentiality, breeding monstrous plots, finding the evidence to link myself with a lost Cajun youth, as a Grecian maiden running from jealous harpies and horny centaurs, being impaled on the poles of my lies, sodomized by former girlfriends and wives, eating my humble pie. The monstrosity of my thoughts and ideals and naive beliefs were magnified beyond all grotesquery, distorted past mere caricature until they attained some semblance of the truth of that which I was so desperately avoiding in life. It was a stepping-stone path to the truth of what I had made for myself, what I had made of myself, and what I had to face if I could ever call myself a human being. My moment of lucidity came, passed, and was forgotten except for the trace element of the memory that I had known it, or perhaps that was the regret of...

I woke up intermittently throughout the months, but it was finally on April 20th that I came out of my sickness, my delirium. It was 2:00, and I lay there until 5:00 when the door opened and a woman came in.

"Oh, you've awoken. And your fever has broken. Can you see, can you hear me?" the voice said as I floated, getting a bearing on sensory stimuli. It was the secretary from our department...

"Have...you... looked after me... all this time."

"Yes," she told me proudly. "Do you remember the day you collapsed in the halls of the maze? You were feverish, and I brought you here and have been caring for you ever since. It's been almost a year that you've been in your brain fever. It's the strongest case of the spleen I've ever seen - oh, my, what awkward phrasing. But I wonder if it's not psychosomatic. The doctors couldn't find anything wrong with you."

I didn't like what I was hearing. I didn't like life, and I didn't like her. I wanted to escape, but I needed information. But what information? I didn't want to know anything. It was all lies.

"Sorry, sir, but there are a few people I need to call to tell that you're awake. How are you feeling?"

"I feel like shit. Worse."

She walked out of the room, and I could hear her talking on the phone in the other room. I had a strong urge to kill. But for what?

It was several hours later. I had been looking out the window the whole time. I could sense that my life was over, that there was really almost nothing left to live for, except to find out some of the answers that I felt I needed. The biggest problem I had was that, as I had always felt in life, I knew I needed answers as much as I needed the ability to formulate the correct questions. I didn't know what I needed, nor did I know why I needed it.

Finally a man walked into the room. He was an unusually large man, with silvery hair, and small white bits of stubble growing out of his cheeks, wiry, wiry, wiry. His cold eyes looked at me knowingly. He seemed to recognize me. He took off his hulking, tawny overcoat, and I saw that he was a much smaller man underneath. He came over to me and sat down.

"Good evening. How are you feeling?"

I didn't say anything.

"There's something I want you to read."

He handed me a thick newspaper, directing me specifically to an article that began on the front page. He told me that is was from the same morning's newspaper. Local Woman to Get the Death Sentence

-by Shi Li-mao

A local woman will be the first person to receive the death sentence under the new legislation recently introduced by the governmental justice association, it was announced yesterday in the supreme court of the nation's capital.

The case was concluded recently, amid a great deal of controversy surrounding it's publication ban. Many of the details of the case still cannot be published, including the dead man's name, however it is known that the suspect, Noireen Nnn... I stopped reading - that was the name of my girlfriend, the woman I had been seeing on and off for the last year... or so...

I had to continue. ... has been found guilty in the murder of her lover, a professor of the local university.

The decision is being contested by several human rights groups that say that it is a cruel and unusual punishment. Women's rights groups protest that it is unfair that the first prisoner to be executed be a woman, pointing towards statistics that show that although there has been a rise recently in violent crimes committed by women, men clearly have the lead in that category, and they point to a wide variety of historical evidence.

The supreme court has announced that there will be no appeals.

The detective took the paper away from me, having seen that I was finished reading it, and asked me what I thought of the case. I said nothing, so he leaned over and told me very forcefully that the dead man had been my colleague, that our rivalry was well known, and that for several months after the body had been found I was a prime suspect, although my whereabouts had been unknown. A break in the case came through DNA samples lifted from a latex condom found in the waste-paper basket in my office had linked the dead man with a new suspect, Miss Noireen Nnn. The suspect was found, tried, and confessed that she had murdered her lover, the man, my colleague. The reasons were that he had been abusive towards her over the year-and-a-half of their relationship. He then revealed to me that this was all very privileged information, that it was within the area prescribed by the publication ban, and that I would face legal action if I tried to disseminate the news, as others had recently attempted.

I told him that I had nothing to say to him, and he got up to leave, on his face that mildly satisfied somber look of a man who had not expected anything before he had arrived, and was not proven wrong. I thought about it for a second, and then called him back, telling him that perhaps I could come up with a statement after I had a chance to talk to Noireen. He told me, in typical fashion, that he would have to consult with his superiors, that he'd contact me if he received permission from the proper places in the upper police hierarchy. He told me that if they didn't decide fast I'd be out of luck, since she didn't have much time left. I told him that if he wanted me to say anything at all, he's better persuade them to hurry up.

As it turned out, it wasn't long before I received permission to see her, just days before her execution. I showed up promptly at the penitentiary where she was being kept, a large gray block that had cells carved out of its mass of solid concrete (only for the most dangerous of criminals). It had been built in the height of the Cold War when the government had devised plans to preserve a blueprint of humanity by protecting its criminals and its geniuses - twin institutions that would create the future technocracy and military. To allow the breeding of brains with aggression was seen by some secret directors as the surest way of perpetuating the human race in the face of apocalypse, allowing the toughest and the smartest to build all of the future societies... should this one fail us. Nevertheless, this was the penitentiary for the criminal element. The one for the intelligentsia had been built in the east.

I wore my sunglasses - the sunlight of the outside world and the neon of the inside world was becoming increasingly harsh on my red eyes. Red from deep midnight wails, fear of the thing that terrified me most, that I still could not name. I wore my best clothes and had just had my hair cut. When I faced my demise, I wanted to look my best.

The interior of the penitentiary was painted black, like the bowels of some huge leviathan, and the staff and prisoners all wore uniforms of the sheerest pristine white. An attractive prison guard with two large revolvers strapped to each hip led me through a vertiginous series of doors that became increasingly smaller, until I was told to seat myself in a small cubicle at the end of the process. She would be brought to me in due course, I was told. All I had to do was wait.

I had heard of these cubicles. They were designed to insure some privacy between visitors and were somewhat isolated from the nearest turnkey; consequently there had been quite a number of mysterious occurrences in the visitor's lounge, under eerie circumstances. Perhaps it was encouraged by the sociologists who ran the institution, and who could reportedly see everything that went on from their places in the administrative cordon.

I waited in that lounge for perhaps two hours, sweating intensely until I almost thought I would faint, or melt, or perhaps just fade away. The waiting was almost unbearable. I had no idea what I would find at the other end of the interview line.

Finally she was led out, and I was shocked to see that her head had been shaved, giving her that almost androgynous look, as if she was something that had combined into herself to form the whole of her real definition, a culmination. She had adapted the coldness of someone who had dealt with the idea of looming death and didn't know what to do with her last moments, stalemated in fortune. I found myself squinting at her appearance in the few brief seconds it took for her to come into the cubicle, navigate her way clumsily around the too-large chair and sit down.

We looked into each others' eyes for a few long moments. There was only an emptiness... there could only be emptiness. Finally she said to me in a strange blurred voice...

"Who are you? Why do you want to talk to me."

I was stunned. I felt as if I was being treated like a reporter.

"Don't you know me?"

"I don't know you. I've never seen you before," she said very methodically. In that instant every memory of everything we had ever done together carved a swath through my vision and then disappeared completely. "I only know him, and that's why he's dead. We couldn't know each other as well as we did and still have one of us survive. But I do know that there is something I must give to you. Before he died, he told me that someone like you would want it. It's inside my uniform: you'll have to reach in and get it."

Debating carefully how badly I really wanted my comrade's last message to me from beyond the grave, my left hand slowly reached out and moved towards her uniform.

"Hurry," she said anxiously.

The sweat running furiously down my brow, unable to wipe it away, my fingers, thumb, wrist were inside the uniform, touching the hardness of a stiff envelope next to the warm softness of her left breast, my fingers gripped the wedge of paper and began to retreat.

In a flash, her upper body writhed and her jaw came down onto my wrist clamping it solidly. I screamed as loud as I could, my free hand quickly reaching out for the envelope and removing it from her, then wrenching the other hand out of her jaws, dripping fury. Standing up to flee, my last glimpse of her was of a woman with her head bowed down, staring at the floor, contorted in some impossible angle.

Retreating past the attendant guards to the bathrooms that I had seen on my way in - it was a women's washroom that I had run into by mistake - and I seated myself as best I could on top of a toilet in one of the stalls. Blood dripping all over it from my bleeding writs, I pulled a sheath of papers out of the manila envelope. What I saw there was this:

Chapter 6: The Raft of the Medusa

It was a manuscript different from the one that had been taken from my office, the one that I hadn't looked at yet. I flipped through it hurriedly until my eyes came to rest on something in the closing pages:

...Gregorska's eyes were moving cautiously, scanning the unfamiliar neighborhood that he was passing through, trying to make no mistake about which stop to get off at. Although the instructions had been vague, to be late or to get lost would be catastrophic. They were expecting him.

Finally the bus looked like it was coming to the right stop. Gregorska stood up, hovering on uncertainty, trying to decide if he should or shouldn't get off. He finally decided that he'd best wait, and the bus whirred by the stop. Looking back, he struggled to remember the exact instructions. "Look for the blue light, the blue light, the blue light", the words drifted through his mind as his bus passed what looked to him like a blue light.

"Stop." He daubed at the bus stop signal with one of his fore feelers, finally causing the red signal light to illuminate at the front of the bus.

The bus continued to lurch on, two stops past where he was supposed to be going, until it finally stopped at the third stop. He heard the driver growl something and he noticed three men behind him stand up at the same time he was deboarding the bus. Fearful, panting, he began to run immediately as all of his feet hit the greasy pavement, back towards that blue light that he had seen - or had he seen it? - so briefly several minutes ago several miles back along the snaking bus route.

Skittering along the road, his feet slipping out from under him periodically, he ran on and on, the sound of footsteps continuing after him as he lurched out of control along the streets. To the blue light, he made his way down alleys, the low narrow dark alleys, vaguely lit by indirect neon, not knowing exactly what he was stepping on, low to the ground like he was, running and running, the fire in his lungs stoked and burning. He saw the rats as he scurried past, he saw the burnt out vagrants lying in garbage regarding him with the same rats eyes, he passed.

Veering along, out of control, Gregorska finally stumbled, four of his legs tied in a knot at the bottom, one of them ripped out at the socket and dangling uselessly, he tumbled head over heels through the laneways, thudding ominously along the cobblestoned way, slipping through

puddles, bouncing off of low walls, deflected and reflected, he could hear the loud rumble of a motorcycle as he finally came to a stop with a bang in a large pile of trash, he lost consciousness of everything except his ragged breathing, his last clutchings of life air...

The next things that Gregorska sensed were repeated splashings of water, clogging up his breathing processes. He stirred, begging the attacker to stop throwing water on him.

"Ah, Gregorska, you've come out of your slumber," a voice said. He opened his eyes and looked up. He recognized the man as one of the men from the bus. Looking even more closely, Gregorska slowly began to realize that he had seen that man before, that he was the man from his building, the man who lived next to him, the man who was - he could barely think it - his neighbor. A stranger neighbor.

"Gregorska, you've probably wondered why we've called you here tonight. Yes, that's right, it was we who wanted you, and it was I who gave you the message. Do you know who we are?" he asked furiously.

Gregorska could only shake his head.

"We are you," the voice boomed, and from out of the shadows came a series of ungeziefer, all bearing an exact resemblance to Gregorska himself. "We are you, attached somehow to you, and here we are for you."

Gregorska looked up. There he was, the Asian correspondent, the Minister of Information of that African nation, the junkie road scholar, the malcontent writer, and the fatal lover, they were all like Gregorska himself, but different. Gregorska looked at the man, his neighbor, but now he too was like all of the others.

"Gregorska, how could you have betrayed us, how could you have done it? You worked too close to them, the ones who are not like us, the ones who have tried to beat us down throughout the whole of history, who have been worse to us than rats. You have cast us adrift with yourself on the ship of the Medusa, Gregorska, condemned us to rot a slow death of pain and dehydration, dooming us all. We're sorry, Gregorska, but judgment has been passed on you."

Then, each one approached him, and their shimmering appearances glowed in the pale light - from man to beast to cockroach to moth to demon and back - and each one showered a crushing blow on him until his ghost was gone, completely, gone.

Under the manuscript was something else. I flung the papers aside, and held in my hand a picture, a picture of the man, my colleague, the dead man. I smiled in strange judgment, in recognition. I could see his features, his face, his nose, his eyes, his hair: they were familiar, and I knew it all along. He really was like me.

(Epilogue:

He had slowed down to an almost complete stop in his development. He was frozen, flat.

At this point it was very easy for his adversary to over-take him, to move ahead of him in the story.

From this vantage point, it was all too easy for the adversary to go back in the text and remove every reference to him, to destroy him thus, to castrate that which was culturally revolting, to remove the incorrect from creation the way only an editor could. This is what the adversary perceived as his mission, although he (the adversary) was only just beginning to suspect that it was all rhetoric, amorphous rhetoric that could be modified ever so slightly some time in the future to in turn remove himself (the adversary) as well. If this were the case he (the adversary) would never know. He (the adversary) would never know if he (the adversary) no longer existed. Dual opposites, seemingly different, are in this case really the same.

Liu Bai-Luan)